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OF
HIGH
DEGREE



SECRET/NOFORN









OF HIGH DEGREE

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OF HIGH DEGREE.

CHAPTER XXIV.

JEALOUS!—OF WHAT?

d It could not be said that he was a blithe bridegroom; but he had been a contented one, and quietly anxious to do everything that might contribute to the bride's happiness. Throughout the preparations for the marriage and during the ceremony he had shown this in many ways; and Dahlia was pleased, being hopeful—hopeful that he would forget all the past, as she had expressed it to him, and come to think that he had only loved once, and that she had been as she was now the only mistress of his affections.

That he would do his duty faithfully she had never doubted; indeed she had only thought of it with a feeling of irritation. Duty may be to the cold-blooded moralist the first element of happiness—some say it is the sole element of happiness—in the married state; but it represents merely a small part of the requisites for true bliss to a passionate nature such as Dahlia's. She craved for the absolute devotion, the self-forgetfulness of a love all-absorbing and all-sufficient to make a world of its own.

She had said that she was greedy, and there was no doubt about it.

Immediately on entering the room she observed the change in his expression. She saw him laying the paper down, as he thought quite calmly, but she noted that he laid it apart from the other papers, as if for future reference.

She at once associated the two things—the

changed expression and the care of the paper. There was something in it which had disturbed him.

What was it?

Now, she had made a number of good resolutions on her wedding morning, and she really intended to carry them out as became a loyal, loving wife. She was never again to do anything cunning, or 'clever,' or 'managing,' as women euphonistically call outwitting a man. She was never to 'pretend' in any way; and above all, she was never to tell another fib in the whole of her life, however good the motive might seem to be.

But at this moment she found it was impossible to act up to the letter of the law she had laid down for her own guidance. She was aware that having a doubt of something being wrong she ought to have gone straight up to him and put the question:—

'What is the matter, Stephen?'

But somehow she was afraid of what she might hear, and she wanted him to be free from all care on this day, and as far as it was in her power she would not by any untimely curiosity do anything to recall unpleasant or painful topics, or to make him think twice about them if they should obtrude themselves upon him. So, she, with a good motive, broke one of her good resolutions and pretended not to have observed any change in him.

He, on his part, with an equally good motive, was certainly not going to mar her pleasure by referring to that paragraph at present. But its sad associations haunted him. He was not a good actor, and the effort he was making by the light of tenderness to dispel the shadow that was in his eyes was quite evident to her.

It would have been better if they had spoken; the attempt to hide from each other their feelings at this moment was as distinct a


sign of that want of perfect confidence which works all the mischief in married life as if their motives had been mean ones.

She was a better actor than he was, and his vision was not so keen as hers. He thought her quite happy and content. But the more she observed him the more curious she became about what he had been reading.

Then she made another slip. She found an opportunity to go to the side table unobserved, and mentally to register the name and date of the paper, so that she might procure a copy of it to study at her leisure. It was the 'Evening News.'

They were to take a walk as it was a beautiful moonlight night, and Dahlia wanted to see what the city was like from the top of the ancient wall. At the door she found that she had forgotten a glove.

'I'll run back for it,' said the dutiful bridegroom.



‘No, no, you would never find it. I will be with you in a minute,’ cried the merry bride, and she slipped upstairs into the room where they had dined.

She snatched up the paper and eagerly scanned its columns. A dozen times her eyes missed that little paragraph, but at last they found it.

‘Ah—it *was* about her!’

That was a spiteful cry, and there was an angry flash in the bright eyes.

But she felt sick when she had read the lines. . . . ‘Poor Ruth!’ . . . And yet there was a kind of satisfaction, too, in this additional sign that she was gone. . . . Gone indeed from this world, but would she ever go from his mind?

There was a sharp sting in that question, and she was vexed with herself for feeling it. Of course he would remember her and think of her with kindly emotion, and she would


remember her too with all kindness. She could not be jealous of her now. It was impossible, and it was ridiculous to fancy for a moment that she could be jealous of the dead.

She heard his step approaching and hastened to meet him. The glove had been in her hand all the time.

‘Were you getting impatient, Stephen? I have just found it.’

And she thought that was no fib, because the ‘it’ she meant was the paragraph; he, of course, understood by ‘it’ — the glove.

They had the broad way of the ancient wall to themselves. Occasionally a straggling pair of lovers passed them with lingering steps, knowing that already they had outstayed the girl’s leave of absence from home, and yet with fearful joy postponing the hour of parting. Stephen and Dahlia could linger as long as they



pleased now; they were to be together till death.

How still the city was : the great towers of the Minster, looking white where the moonlight fell upon them, and absolutely black in the shadow, rose like majestic guardians of its peace over the quaint, irregular roofs. For the moment the sense of peace which prevailed was not broken by the distant panting of railway engines or their shrill whistle. The gentle Ouse flowed sleepily through the city, here glistening and trembling like quicksilver, there dark and, as it seemed, motionless. At various points the red glow of furnaces became pale beacons in the moon's soft light.

All the world seemed far apart from these two, wandering along their silent way, arm linked in arm, life linked in life. They should have been happy.

‘I wish we could always be like this, Ste-

phen,' said Dahlia, involuntarily tightening her hold upon his arm. 'Always alone together—away from everybody—with nothing and nobody to think about but one another.'

She was childishly earnest, crying for the moon.

'What a wish,' he said, laughing gently, and looking into her upturned face. 'You would soon be tired of me, and I don't want that to happen.'

'It never will.'

'I hope not; but you don't know what a gloomy creature like me can do to make the brightest nature dull. Look at the river there, how clear and gay it seems where it is free, and how dismal it is where the shadows fall on it.'

'But you are not going to be dull any more, sir,' she exclaimed playfully; 'you are going to be an active country squire, and do all sorts of

wonderful things with the land and the labourers and the machinery, and all those sorts of things you have been busying yourself about.'

'Ah; but you see I could scarcely be the active squire if we were to remain for ever on the top of York walls in the moonlight. You see work must come in if we are to have happiness. I don't think Eve would have touched that apple if she had had plenty of work on her hands.'

There was a brief pause. Dahlia was thinking. Although she had given vent to a highly sentimental wish, quite appropriate to the scene and the occasion, she was perfectly aware that it was nonsense.

'All the same it would be nice if we could be always as we are just now,' she said, regretfully. 'But as that can't be, then we must find our happiness in whatever way you think best. We must work—work hard, Stephen, and you must become a great man. Perhaps you will go

into Parliament, and who knows what you might not do then!’

‘Sit in a corner, be a good boy, and vote with my party as I was bid,’ he replied, laughing at this flight of ambitious dreaming.

‘I am sure you would do nothing of the sort. . . . I should not let you.’


‘What has put all this into your head?’

‘You, Stephen, you! I want you to be more than other men. I want you to be something great—to do something that will make the world admire you as I do.’

Her eyes were flashing with the brilliance of a passionate spirit—a brilliance that outshines diamonds—and her cheeks were aglow with enthusiasm.

He was stirred by her passion, by her belief in him, and out there on the walls of York he gave her a kiss that was more of a lover’s than any he had yet given her.

‘What an ambitious soul you are, Dahlia,’



he said, 'and how disappointed you will be when you find out what a very ordinary mortal your man is.'

'But I won't be disappointed. I know it is in you, Stephen, and you will work—you will let me share all your thoughts?'

'I shall do what is in me to satisfy you.'

'And you promise that you will let me share all your thoughts, whether they be sad or pleasant ones?'

'Yes, the pleasant ones, certainly.'

'And the unpleasant ones, too. I am not what Mr. Rapier says most women are—fair in fair weather and foul in foul. I want my share of the bad as well as the good. Promise me.'

'I promise.'


'Then there is a happy future before us.'

She was quite confident of it as she nestled close under his arm. For the time being both forgot the past, and were happy in their visions of the future.

That was a night to remember, and both did remember it longingly afterwards, and Dahlia's childish cry, 'I wish we could always be like this,' came back to him as the inspiration of some prophetic instinct to which neither had given sufficient heed at the right moment. What schemes they formed, what dreams they dreamed! What reforms were to be wrought first at Derewood and to radiate thence throughout the whole of England. The agriculture was to be improved; the discontent of the labourers was to be extinguished forever in the prosperity which the reformation was to bring to them!

There was a noble purpose for their lives, and plenty of work for them to do even in the attempt to accomplish it.

He had satisfaction in thinking of the practical ways of carrying out their project; she was gleeful thinking of the honours which would be heaped upon him, she sharing them.




He would go to Parliament ; he would make great speeches ; everybody would be talking of him ; he would be knighted, and ' Lady Meredith ' would sound charmingly.

And she had roused him to it all ! She had wakened the latent genius that she knew was in him ; she had toiled with him up the steep hill, without her he would have been only a respectable country gentleman, a useful man no doubt within the small range of his immediate surroundings. She had made him a public benefactor, and how proud she would be of him !

How beautiful that castle in the air looked to her, there in the moonlight ! Yes, there was a happy future before them.

High festival was held at Derewood when they returned. They were looking as well and happy as a couple ought to look after their honeymoon tour.



They had spent a few days in Edinburgh ; they had done the Trossachs, and Dahlia had been in raptures with ‘The Lady of the Lake,’ which she read for the first time under the happiest circumstances, and considered it really an excellent guide to the beautiful scenery. Then they had sped on to Aberdeen and Ballater. There they rested for a week—if driving through deep glens and climbing high mountains from morning till night may be called resting. Of course they went on Sunday to Crathie Kirk, and the bride felt as proud as if she had been presented at court when she sat in the presence of the Queen, the Prince and Princess of Wales, and other members of the royal family. She felt that she would go to church every Sunday if she were living in that neighbourhood. The service was so simple, the sermon she was sure was splendid, although she could not remember even what the text was, she having been so busy studying the

dress of the Princess and watching the Queen to see if she were attending to the minister

But a still greater glory was in store for her. Driving back from Braemar—where they had gone for lunch after leaving the kirk—their driver suddenly pulled up at the side of the road.

‘What are you stopping for?’ inquired Stephen.

‘Her Majesty,’ was the response.

A single outrider came round the bend of the road and passed them. Presently an open carriage appeared, four ladies seated in it.

‘That’s the Queen wi’ the big straw hat,’ said the driver carelessly—as if the privilege of seeing Her Majesty were one to which he was too much accustomed to be greatly moved by it, whilst he felt that it was one for which these Southerners ought to be specially grateful to him and remember when giving him his tip.

Stephen uncovered, and Dahlia bowed ex-

citedly, wondering all the time at the simplicity and homeliness of the attire of the Queen of this great country, and the Empress of India, and quite bewildered to see how like she was to any other good-natured, well-to-do matron.

Then, when the Queen in passing gave them a bow and a pleasant smile all to themselves, Dahlia felt that already her husband had become a great man, and that she was basking in the halo of his glory. She was sure that her Majesty would recognise them when they went to court—as they would do some day—and regard them as old friends. With the sunshine which the memory of these honours made for her, they returned to Derewood.

In the days of Stephen's father the Grange had been famous for its hospitality. The feasts had been frequent, always merry and sometimes hilarious. There was always a race, or a coursing match, or a hunt going on somewhere,

to give occasion for a gathering of rollicking spirits, and they led to other gatherings. At his death a shadow fell upon the place. Stephen would have nothing to do with races ; he would not bet, and he found that he could not afford to belong to the hunt. He had, however, as much interest as the greatest sportsman in thoroughbred horses ; he gave special attention to cattle breeding and the practical business of agriculture. But the Grange was no longer a Liberty Hall.

Now the shadow had cleared away, and the merriment of other days was revived, but modified by the changes of time and seasons.

‘ Mrs. Meredith is a charming lady and an excellent hostess. She provides the best dinner in the county, and Meredith really seems to know something about wines and cigars.’

That was the verdict of Mr. Calthorpe, of Calthorpe, a connoisseur in all matters pertaining to the table.

'She be a reg'lar good 'un, the young missus,' was the verdict of Zachy, the postman, who was, in his way, an authority as to the character of the heads—and, indeed, of all the members—of all the households within the circuit of his rounds.

'I al'ays said the good times was coming again,' observed old Dick Smalley cheerfully. 'The company ain't quite so jolly, maybe, as they used to be, and maybe they don't chuck their suvrins about as some of 'em used to do; and the master ain't got the grit of the old man, but he's a good sort. And the missus—there ben't the likes of her nowhere.'

Dick had been general factotum at Dere-wood years before Stephen was born, and therefore had a right to express an opinion as to the condition of persons and things.

Amongst the congratulations which Dahlia received on her installation as mistress of the Grange, was one from Rapier. It was brief,

as all his epistolary communications were—he had an antipathy to black and white, and never wrote if he could speak, on the principle that you can give so many meanings to a spoken phrase, and so very few to a written one.

This was what he said :

‘No one can congratulate you more sincerely than I do. No one can say more heartily than I do, “may you live long and prosper.”

‘What might have been I put aside, and accept what is, cheerfully. I trust that you will believe amongst the things that be is the fact that I am always faithfully yours to command,

‘LEWIS RAPIER.’

‘P.S.—Burn this and all that I have ever written to you.’

She smiled at that injunction; she had burned every scrap of his writing and everybody else’s long ago.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE YEAR HAS PASSED.

A FINE crisp morning in December ; red berries gleaming here and there in the black hedges, and a thick sheet of hard snow sparkling on the ground. The sun was like a red ball, but there was a cold greyness in the atmosphere.

Across a newly ploughed field, the furrows of which were as high as the top of his stout gaiters, tramped Stephen Meredith towards the highway. Cutting across this field shortened the distance to Dunthorpe by half a mile.

As he was unfastening the gate at the corner of the field next the road, he saw

approaching him a rough-looking man whose face was more than half covered by short, bushy, black hair. His skin was so sun tanned that he might have been a mulatto. His dress and bearing at once proclaimed that he was a seaman.

‘Morning, master: mayhap you can tell me the nearest way to Derewood Grange?’

Stephen halted with his hand on the gate, and it seemed as if somehow his heart missed a beat. His thoughts had been far away from the subject that morning, but the appearance of this man had instantly recalled the *Eucalyptus*.

‘That is the Grange yonder among the trees,’ he replied, eyeing the man with much interest and curiosity. ‘The shortest way to it is through the field, but if you follow the road you will see the gate a little farther on.’

‘Thank’ee. I suppose there won’t be any harm in taking the shortest cut?’

‘I dare say not ; but who is it you wish to see at the house ?’

‘The master—Meredith. Do you happen to know him ?’

‘Meredith is my name, and I am supposed to be the master. Where do you come from ?’

‘Well, I come a long journey,’ answered the man somewhat suspiciously, ‘and I’m bound to give my message to no one but Mr. Meredith himself. I’m from Australia.’

‘Were you one of the crew of the *Eucalyptus* ?’ asked Stephen huskily, and trembling with excitement.

‘Aye, sir, I was.’

‘What boat did you get off in ?’

‘The first that was launched—the life-boat.’

‘My God—then you were with her—with Miss Clark ?’

‘That’s so, sir. How did you find that

out, for I'm certain there ain't another of 'em here.'

'Never mind how—I know you. You are Harry Smith, the second mate. Tell me, was she saved? Is she alive?'

The man was for the moment dumb in presence of that great passion of anxiety, hope, and fear.

'Speak, speak,' he cried again before Smith could open his mouth.

'She was saved from the water, sir, and I believe she's living.

'Thank God.'

Then silence fell upon the place. Stephen rested on the gate. Although his eyes were open they were blind to all that surrounded him. He was giddy with wild joy, the light dazed his brain and bewildered him, as the eyes are dazed and blinded by looking full at the sun at noon. He forgot everything but the glad fact that she was saved.

Then utter darkness followed quickly, and his soul sank in despair.

RUTH WAS ALIVE AND HE WAS MARRIED !

Surely there was a fire in his brain. Surely there was a mistake somewhere ! Surely all that had passed was a hideous nightmare. He was *not* false to Ruth !

He did not know how long he had been standing there resting on the gate ; but at last he became conscious of a friendly grasp on his arm, and the sailor's voice sounding in his ear.

‘ Come, master, rouse up. What’s the matter ? ’

He saw the brown face with its bushy black hair close to his own ; he heard the voice repeating the question ; he looked round and knew that it was no dream.

‘ Dahlia !—how will she bear this news ? ’ was his first thought. His second was that he must keep her ignorant of it until he had him-

self learned everything and had had time to decide how to act.

He roused himself with a violent effort.

‘Come with me,’ he said, and at a rapid pace he led the way to Dunthorpe.

Harry Smith accompanied him—he had no doubt now that he had found the man for whom he brought his message—and Stephen did not speak until they were in a private room at the King’s Arms.

‘Tell the waiter if you want anything. Then sit down and tell me all you know of her.’

The sailor ordered some rum, and drank to Mr. Meredith’s health. Stephen stood waiting, and almost afraid to speak.

‘D’you feel better now, sir? Why don’t you try a drop yourself?’

‘Never mind me. Tell me about—Miss Clark. Where is she?’

‘I can’t tell that exactly; I parted with her

up country. She might have got away with me, but she wouldn't leave one as had been a good friend to her, 'cause he'd got hurt and weren't able to come along with us. He was one of the rummest customers I ever come across—Harrison by name.'


'It was he who saved her from being washed overboard some time before the wreck.'

'That's so, sir. How do you come to know?'

'Your first mate, McNeil, told us all about what happened up to the point where you left the ship, and your boat was supposed to have been swamped.'

This removed the last shade of doubt the man might have entertained as to Stephen's identity.

'We thought ourselves that it was all over. However, we kept fast hold, the boat righted, and we got clear away. But now as I know there ain't any mistake that you are the gentle-



man the lady made me promise to find afore I rested after getting home, here's something for you, sir. She hadn't no way of writing in the bush, and she said, says she, "this 'll be a token that he may trust you, and you will tell him all that's come to us." "Aye, aye, miss," says I, "if so be as I ever get home I'll tramp the whole country till I find him." And here you are.'

Smith had drawn from the depths of his breast pocket a small packet wrapped in brown paper.

'I put it into paper as soon as I got to civilised parts,' he explained.

With trembling fingers Stephen opened the packet. Within the paper was a piece of merino—a fragment of a woman's dress—bound with long grass, and it contained an opal ring, and a lock of Ruth's hair, cut from the head with a sailor's knife.

He knew the hair—aye, so well! And the

ring, too ; it was one he had given her, and he remembered saying at the time :

‘ If I were superstitious, Ruth, I should not give you opals, for it is said they are always a token of misfortune.’

What terrible testimony to the correctness of the superstition the present case might bear.

He turned aside and touched the hair with his lips ; but it was with a strange joy in which there was a strong element of pain. This was not a relic of the dead, but a sign from the living Ruth.

Smith was too busily and too agreeably occupied to observe him, and having filled his pipe and replenished his glass with grog, he patiently awaited orders.

These tokens from Ruth’s own hand brought him calmness, and he was able to interrogate the man quietly. The latter spoke with little emotion ; he was apparently getting used to being shipwrecked.

‘ You see, sir, as I told you, that wave as we thought had done for us, saved us. It took us clean away from the ship, and we drove so fast before the wind that when we got breath and were able to look about we could see nothing but the waves like mad dancing mountains all around us.

‘ “ Hold fast for your lives, and steady,” says I, but there was no need for it ; the fright kept ’em fixed like figure-heads to their places.

‘ There wasn’t anything to be done in such a sea, oars and sails were no use. I got the tiller and tried to turn it to the best account, but we were banged about all night like a bit of down in a gale, and could only trust to the boat holding together.

‘ In the morning the wind went down, and we were able to see who was aboard. There was the lady, Miss Clark, her friend, Mr. Harrison, two gentlemen that were going out for their health (poor souls, one was lying dead at

the bottom of the boat when my eye lighted on him, and t'other went afore the next night was out); and there was a Sydney man, who worked with a will when we got a chance. Then there was me and four of my mates. All the provisions we had was a bag of biscuits and a keg of water

‘I shan’t forget the look on them faces as they came out of the darkness one by one in the morning light. Never a one spoke. They looked at me, and I couldn’t give them any more comfort than by saying, “The boat’s a good ’un.” All that day and all the next night we were at the mercy of the waves, and the boat was a good ’un. She held together bravely.

‘But the silence of everybody was almost harder to bear nor the storm.

‘On the second morning the water was quieter, and I thought we were in the right track to be picked up. But we weren’t. I

served out rations of the biscuits and water regularly, and everyone took his share without a word. Everyone behaved as well as if they'd been aboard the ship and under the cap'en himself.

'The sea got quiet at last, and we were able to use the oars; but what good was that? Our only chance was to sight a vessel and be picked up. Half a dozen times we saw a sail, but too far off for any signal of ours to be seen.

"There's land!" cried the lady on the seventh morning, and land it was.

'We made straight for the nearest point, and before dark we were ashore. But we didn't seem much better off then, for there wasn't a sight of any hut, or house, or any living human creature anywhere.'

CHAPTER XXVI.

IN THE BUSH.

HARRY SMITH paused at that point. He had been passing in memory through all those hardships and perils of the sea which his words feebly indicated: they could not convey to the listener the feeling of that tension of nerve which makes man indifferent to sex and humanity in his greedy desire of saving self.


He was a rough fellow, but a clever one, as McNeil had owned, 'although he was a cockney,' and he had gone through a good many trials at sea; yet the mere remembrance of that time when, after their seven days' buffeting with the water, they touched land, made him pause as if he felt his breath come short

as it had done at the moment when he stepped on shore.

As he thought of it all he even pushed aside his grog with a feeling of disgust, and allowed his pipe to go out.

‘You think of it, sir,’ he said, with teeth set and eyes staring through the wall and into space, where he saw, as in a panorama, every incident repeated.

‘You think of it; there we was landed, eight of us, we didn’t know where, and nothing and nobody to give us a notion about the place! (Of course it was a comfort to feel our feet on solid ground again, but we were stiff and sore, half-starved and sick, so that after the first minute or two our gratitude to the Almighty for saving us from the water turned into something uncommon like discontent with Him because we had been put ashore only to be made aware that we could be as badly off on the land as out on the sea.’



‘Had you no instruments of any kind to guide you?’ inquired Stephen.

‘We had nothing of any sort to help us except the sun and the stars. We knew that our course had been westerly, and that was all. Howsoever, the first thing we had to do was to settle ourselves for the night, and in the morning we could have a look round. We hauled our boat up and turned her on one side against the wind. Luckily for us it wasn’t cold, for we had nothing but the clothes we stood in and the boat’s canvas for covering, and we made shift well enough considering.

‘Miss Clark was like our own cap’en, now we were ashore, and every one of us was doing just what she told him like as though we’d signed articles under her. She showed us where to pitch the boat, and by getting the stern a little bit athwart a lump of rock, she contrived to have a sort of corner for herself that we called her cabin. Harrison and the Sydney man

worked first rate. So did my mates—all bar one, Tomkins by name. He was the only chap that said a word wrong when we were on the sea, and that was settled easy. He grumbled about his share of the vittles, and I told him we'd chuck him over to the fishes if he spoke about it again.

“No, we won't waste him,” said the Sydney man, eyeing him all over as a butcher might have done a calf.

“We knew what he meant, and so did Tomkins, and there was no more grumbling from him till we got ashore. Then the first thing he does is to skulk up among the rocks without giving us a hand in fixing our camp.

““Keep your eye on that man,” says Harrison; “he means mischief to you.”

“But I wasn't afear'd of him, and fancied Sydney (that's what we called the Sydney man) had more need to look out than me, if the chap did mean any harm. It wasn't of no account

whether he did or no, for I didn't sleep that night, and I don't believe the cap'en did either. Anyway, when I was rising with the sun I saw her up on the top of the highest rock, looking seaward and landward. Harrison got up at the same time as me, and he says :

“ We ought to be using our legs, Smith, or we'll get too stiff to move at all. Miss Clark shames us by being the first on duty.”

“ She does hold out most wonderful,” says I. “ Blest if I ever came across a woman with such nerve and pluck afore—she's as good as the boat.”

‘ And it's true, she was as good as the boat, and did almost as much to save us. The next thing Harrison says is :

“ What have you left of our stores ? ”

“ Two rounds more of biscuit and one of water, and it will be a bad job for us if we don't happen on some sort o' fresh water soon.”


‘ “ We’ll have to join Miss Clark and see what we can make of the place.”

‘ It was not cheery to look at. There was plenty of rock about the beach ; then there was a great stretch of ground with all the grass burned yellow and black, so that it looked like sand, and might have been the Desert of Sahara itself. Away beyond this yellow land-sea there was a line of black that we guessed right enough to be the borders of a forest.

‘ “ There ain’t no use of us going into the forest,” say Harrison, and he looked down on his luck, awful. “ We’ll have to keep by the coast.” ’

‘ That was right enough, for you must have heard like me of the hard lines people have had in the bush.

‘ “ There’s a rule of the road the diggers used to have,” says I, “ and that is when you have lost your way in the bush turn your back on the road you believe to be the right one,



and you'll land in your camp safe enough. Now, as we all think we oughtn't to go into the bush at all, that's just the part we ought to steer for according to the diggers' rule."

"How far do you think it is?" says he.


"A good day's tramp for us," says I, "considering the state we're in, not to speak of the cap'en, and she must be mortal tired."

"Don't think about me," says she; "I'll do whatever you have to do. But look—isn't that smoke rising above the trees?"

"Didn't our eyes follow that pretty hand, and that long bone of a finger. #

"Smoke it is," said Sydney, who came up at that minute. "Like enough it's natives, and as we are so hard run we'll have to take our chance of finding them friends or foes."

"There was nothing else for us to do, and Sydney said as the natives weren't a bad sort if you only rubbed them the right way. We took the canvas and some of the tackle of the boat,



as they might come in handy on our travels, and we set out across that horrid yellow land-sea. We were a miserable pack, but a bit cheered up as we started, for it was a kind of relief to feel that our troubles were coming to an end, one way or t'other. Any way we had to move on, for without water we couldn't stop there to wait for the chance of a sail.

‘ We took our last drop of water afore starting, and we had one round of biscuit left that we meant to keep till evening, but it was given out then, as it was easiest to carry when divided. You should have seen how the cap'en stepped out! Lord! you wouldn't have thought she'd been brought up in luxury, and had never tramped anywhere afore except for her own pleasure. The sight of her stepping out so brave and hopeful-like, put some go into us. We'd have been shamed into putting on all our sail even if we hadn't been comforted by the sight of her.


‘ Tomkins slunk behind, and I saw the

beggar munching his last piece of biscuit afore we were half across the plain.

“ You shan’t have none o’ mine,” thinks I to myself, “ and you ain’t likely to get any from our mates either.”

‘ The look of that forest changed as we got nearer to it, getting more and more footsore. The trees seemed to go right up into the sky, and stood so close together that they made us think as we had come to a great black wall at the end of the world. But the sun getting down behind the trees showed us that there were openings in the wall, and there were streaks of light through the blackness that our cap’en said was just so many flashes of hope.

‘ We had steered straight for the smoke that had tempted us to go on ; but we had lost sight of it long afore we came to the forest. We kept on the same course, hōws’ever, and at last came to the trees. They were a bit straggling at first as if they were advance sentinels, but soon



they became thick enough, and we made a halt to rest and calculate the bearings of the place.

‘ We were preparing to squat in the long grass when all of a sudden Harrison shouts—

‘ “ I hear water ! ”

‘ And he banged through the bush, and out of sight in a minute, as if he’d been born in the woods. Next we heard him a hallooing like mad, and we followed him—me and Sydney going first to clear the way for the cap’en. Through them bushes we came to a sight that made our hearts jump.

‘ There was a big dell, water running down the face of the rocks and making a channel through the trees—as pretty a stream as ever man set eyes on. It was just like silver and gold, for the sun was setting on it.

‘ “ We’re too late,” says Harrison, “ but this is where the fire was, and there’s been a camp here.”


‘ We saw the black and white ashes of what



had been a fire, and Harrison picked up one of them tins they pack Australian beef and mutton in. Sydney took it out of his hand, and he looked as if he'd found a nugget of gold when he smelt the can.

“ Well,” says he, “ I knew that my mutton was good, but I never knew till now that it was the best that ever was upon this earth. This is one of the tins of my own company, mates, and it ain't long since it was opened—don't smell it any of you, or it'll give you the gripes with hunger, as it has done me.”

‘ But we did smell it, and it did give us the gripes of hunger, as he said it would, and we all of us drank gallons of water and ate our biscuit—that is all except the cap'en and Tomkins; she was too busy with something in herself, and he had nothing to eat. I saw him a-drinking of the blessed water, and a-eyeing of us, and I knowed that he'd have snapped the bit out of our mouths if he could. And somehow, sir



. . . . Lord forgive me, sir, but I'd taken such a feeling against the man that I didn't pity him! All the same his greedy look made my own bite feel queer in my stomach, and I shut my eyes.

'It couldn't have been more than a minute when I hears a shout from everybody.

'The matter was that Tomkins had been trying to steal the cap'en's biscuit, and Harrison had just caught him. So Tomkins up with a stone and knocked him on the head. Next minute Sydney had Tomkins by the throat down on the ground, and looking blue in the face.

'The cap'en was seeing to Harrison—he'd got an ugly cut on the temple—but she found time to notice what they were doing to Tomkins.

"Don't hurt him," says she. "It was natural—he was hungry."

'But we weren't going to take that soft view of it, though we didn't lynch him as for a minute we thought of doing—for you know


we had the boat's tackle handy. So Sydney says to him, speaking for all :

‘ “ You make tracks for yourself, young man, and think it lucky that you haven't quite done for our mate ; but count it luckier still that the lady asks us to have mercy on you. For my own part, I think it would be the greatest mercy to you if we were to pitch you head first over that rock into the water—only it would dirty the blessed water ! ”

‘ The cove slunk away from us looking as black as poison, and he would have poisoned every one if he could. We saw no more of him, at any rate so long as I was there.


‘ What we had to do was to look after Harrison, and that was enough for us. The cap'en was there, and she says :

‘ “ Look here, friends, I know what it is to you—life or death ; and when it comes to that it is every man for himself—very well. You want to follow the track of the people who



have been here. You see that Mr. Harrison can't go . . . May be he will never be able to move out of this place. That's a reason why I should stay by him, but that is a reason also why you should go on and leave us here. Should you find help near, then you can send for us; if you don't—why then we must do the best we can till death gives us relief. I don't think he will suffer much; and I know that I will suffer less in dying here beside him than I would if any of you were to stay here and lose the chance of saving yourselves."

'Now, sir, it sounds cruel, I dare say, but when it comes to a question of life or death, the best of us do things that seem cruel to you who are sitting at home without feeling stomach or brain tugging at you and crying for food and life. We weren't able to carry him, or we would have done it. She would not leave him on no account . . . and so . . . well,



and so we were obliged to leave them both there in the forest.


‘But Sydney and me and our mates did the best we could for them first. We made up a sort of tent with the canvas, and we were ready to go away when he kind of came to himself.

‘Then came the worst of it all; for he calls out to us—

‘“For God’s sake, lads, take her away with you! I’m done for, at any rate, and you are doing murder if you allow her to stay here with me. . . . Take her away, I say, take her back to England—back to Stephen Meredith—don’t leave her here to die with me for the great God’s sake——”

‘And then he couldn’t speak any more, for he fainted off, and we saw that the bandages had come off his head, so that the blood was running.

‘The cap’en tied up the wound again, and



says to us, quite as if she'd been in no danger herself—

“You are not to mind him, friends. He does not know what he is saying. Do as I tell you. Save yourselves. Save us if you can.”

‘We saw that she meant it, and we agreed. Sydney says to her :

“If I live I'll come back as soon as we catch hold of anybody that can give me food for you. I'm doing you the best service in leaving you.”

“I know that,” says she.

“And I'll do the same,” says I.

“No,” says she. “You'll be making your way back to England. I want you to do something that is more to me than if you came back with food for us. I want you to take a message home.”

‘Then she took that ring from her finger, and with my knife she cut that hair from her head and that stuff out of the skirt of her



gown, and tied them with the grass as you see. Then, says she,

“ You are to find Stephen Meredith, at Derewood Grange, near Dunthorpe, in Essex, England. Tell him all that has happened, and say that if I am alive I shall be home at the end of the year.”

‘ I gave my promise, as you can guess I would, and as soon as it was daylight we went off straight in the tracks of the people as had been camping in the dell.

‘ It was about noon when we came up with them, for they were an exploring party of engineers and surveyors from Melbourne, and weren’t moving fast, as they had to stop so often. They gave us help and grub, willing as could be ; and better than that, the chief of the party knew Sydney, and was ready to do anything for him. So without resting he went back to the cap’en and Harrison. I went down to the coast with four of the exploring

party, who had to take some reports back to the Government office. I didn't think there was any need for me to go back to the cap'en, as I knew she was safe now. Then I got a ship that was bound for Liverpool, as I was told, but it took me to China instead, for they were short of hands, and the mate finding I wanted to get home told me a darned lie till he got me safe out of port. Then from Shanghai I made my way to Liverpool at last, barring a few days with my own folk at Wapping. I haven't put off any time till I found you, sir, and told you the whole story as near as I could.'

The curious jumble of generosity and selfishness which this story revealed did not strike Stephen at the time; indeed there were moments in the course of the narrative when he became impatient to reach the end; and yet he was eager to have an account of every

step of the cruel way Ruth had trodden; eager to live it over with her even in this man's rough account of her trials, and, half-unconsciously, he was jealous of the man, Harrison, who had throughout taken the place he should have held in her life.

The one point he was eager about found utterance as soon as the man paused.

'Then you are sure that she was saved?' he cried.

Harry Smith looked at him as if offended by the question.

'I wouldn't have come away if that hadn't been certain. The party we came up to were Englishmen as knowed the way, and they weren't likely to leave a fellow-countrywoman and a wounded countryman to perish in the bush. Besides, Sydney would have gone back hisself—as I would have done for the matter of that.'

'I beg your pardon, Smith, but a consider-

able time has passed since you left her, and we have heard nothing.'

'I daresay you will hear afore long. You know, sir, you can't come from the other end of the world in a day.'

CHAPTER XXVII.


IS IT TRUE?

YES, he would hear soon. She would come back and find him the husband of Dahlia Whitcombe. What then? How could he explain? She must turn away from him, believing that all his protestations of fidelity had been false, or the fidelity of such brief tenure as to be worthless.

Something more terrible than death stood between them now.

And what of poor Dahlia?

This should have been good news—it should have been joyful news to them all. They should have been rejoicing and shouting thanks for the safety of their friend, and here was he



thinking over it as if some new calamity had befallen them! This was unmanly, and unworthy doubt of Ruth. When she heard all she would own that he had not been false.

There was only one course to pursue : Love must give place to Duty. The marriage was an unfortunate business for them all, and he did not know who would suffer most.

There had been a blunder—it was torture to think how cruel the blunder had been for Dahlia, for Ruth, and for himself. He must take the blame to himself; but there was nothing he could do to make their suffering less; his whole strength must be given to the effort to avoid doing anything which might make it more.


Then that first flood of joy at the mere fact that she was saved, which had been stopped by the consciousness of his own changed position, burst through the barrier and resumed its course.

Ruth was saved, and he was happy. Ruth lived, and he was glad !

He gave all needful directions for the comfort of Harry Smith and hastened back to the Grange. There when he had repeated the wonderful story, eyes and mouths were wide with amazement. Next came exclamations of surprise and of a kind of admiration for the heroine of so many perils.

‘How glad we shall all be to see her,’ said Dahlia, smiling, ‘and you especially, Stephen—how glad you must be ! I suppose you won’t condescend to speak to any of us ordinary mortals for days after she comes home, for of course she will never think of staying out there in that dreadful country.’

Dahlia was quite calm, and still smiling. She was quite sincere in her congratulation, for she was sustained by the confidence of possession. She took the common-sense—some might call them the common-place—views of the position ;



Ruth was saved and that was lucky for her ; but she was too late to regain her old lover. Many old sweethearts were friends although married to somebody else, and she had even heard some so situated making jokes about the old times without husbands or wives being at all disturbed in consequence.

There was no reason why their case should be different from that of others. So, at first she experienced a sense of relief in learning that Ruth was alive, for it removed some remorseful reflections from her mind, whilst it could not alter the fact that Stephen was her husband.

‘But are you sure it is true?’ she asked suddenly, while the girls were still loud in their expressions of wonder.

‘There can be no doubt that she reached the land, and that friendly aid was found in good time to rescue her and her wounded companion.’


‘I have heard that impostors have found out people who have lost friends at sea, and coming in the disguise of sailors have got large sums of money for giving false news of the safety of the lost ones.’

‘This man is no impostor, Dahlia. He might have invented any number of lies, but he could not invent this lock of hair or this ring which I gave her.’

‘Oh, we did not know about them before.’

He had regarded them as treasures which were not intended for general exhibition, and Dahlia did not ask to see them now. There was a scarcely perceptible shade of coldness in the tone in which she referred to them.

Mrs. Meredith, senior, had proposed shortly after the marriage that she should remove with three of the girls to a house in Dunthorpe, in order that the young couple might not be hampered by the presence of a mother-in-law. The proposal was made vaguely and faintly,



and Dahlia would not hear of it. She made only this condition—a very sensible one, too—that there should be certain rooms in the house which should be recognised as reserved for Stephen and herself, and that they should be in every way regarded as if they formed a separate establishment.

She was glad now that she had made this arrangement, for she felt that whatever might happen she would have an ally at hand. There was another ally she might summon if——

But what should she want any ally for? Not surely to plot against her husband? Then she recalled all her good resolutions and smiled again, determining anew that she would keep them.

All the same, she could not help a sense of irritation at times as she saw the eagerness with which he watched the coming of the post, and listened to his daily report——


‘Bassnett has no news yet.’

She could not help a little bit of playful banter that was more than half intended to wound.

‘What a pretty romance it will be if Ruth should nurse that gentleman who saved her from being washed overboard, till he gets well, and then marry him. That would be beautiful, wouldn’t it, Juliet?’

‘Perfectly lovely,’ was the romantic young lady’s response.

Stephen could not help wincing and being ashamed of himself for doing so. He thought often about Harrison : had recognised from the first that this stranger had occupied the place which should have been his, and would have been his if he had not been compelled by the duties he owed to the others to stay in England when Ruth went away. This stranger had been near to help her in danger, to share with her all the privations of the tempest and escape, and even to risk his life for her.



All this he (Stephen) should have done, and it had been left for another to do. She could not but be grateful to the man who had done it, and why should she not learn to love him when she heard what had taken place at Derewood in her absence?

He had thought of it seriously, and tried to believe that he would be able to look upon the event of Ruth's marriage to this brave stranger as one coming in the natural course of things now, and one on which he had to offer her congratulations.

He had overcome the agony of thinking her dead. . . . There were moments—when Dahlia was petulant, unreasonable, gloomy, or giving him one of those playful little stabs (which he had only recently come to understand were meant for stabs)—in which he felt that it was easier to think of Ruth dead than Ruth married to another.

The horrid selfishness of that feeling made



him run from himself and seek distraction in working harder than ever, and in being more attentive than ever to Dahlia.

But she saw and understood. No, they could not be like ordinary folk and take things as they came in a calm, sensible way. She had been jealous of Ruth's memory. How was she to endure the thought of Ruth living!

She did what—not so long ago—she had believed it impossible for her to do; she suggested that Mr. Rapier should be invited to dinner. She had no plan; no idea of any plan; the only motive for the suggestion sprang from the idea that her former friend might know something more about Ruth than Mr. Bassnett, or might say something which would help her. She really could not explain to herself the exact nature of the impulse which made her say he should be invited.

‘It is a long time since we have seen him,’ said Stephen, ready to gratify any wish of hers;

‘but I heard from Bassnett that he is on active duty of some sort again, and has been away from London a good deal lately. He may not be able to come to us at present. However, I’ll write to the Cosmos.’

He wrote, and in two days came an answer; on the evening of the fourth day came Rapier himself.

‘I knew that you would want me,’ he said in a low voice to his hostess.

It was after dinner. She was seated at the piano, and he was beside her making a pretence of turning over the leaves of the music. As he spoke her fingers struck the keys sharply, and a grand bravura passage was suddenly interpolated in the piece she was playing.

‘Why do you think I want you?’

‘Because your husband happened to mention in his note that it was you who had reminded him of my existence.’

She continued playing for a few moments ; then, carelessly,

‘Surely one may remember an old friend without having any special need of his help?’

‘Quite so. People often do remember old friends merely because they have a vacant place at dinner ; but you want something more. Tell me what it is, frankly—if you can.’

It was not quite clear in what sense he used the last three words. Again she played a few moments before responding.

‘Do you know anything of this strange story about Ruth Clark?’ she asked abruptly. ‘Is it true? Is she alive?’

He smiled ; he always admired his own astuteness.

‘Surely her being alive or dead can be of no consequence to you now?’

He took infinite pains to separate two leaves of the music which had stuck together, and he



contrived to see her face. She was staring fixedly at the music, and her lips were tightly closed.

‘You cannot doubt your husband’s faith,’ he proceeded, ‘and you can trust her honour?’

‘Is it true?’ she repeated without looking at him, but his question had stirred a buzzing as of a hive of bees in her brain. ‘You cannot doubt your husband’s faith, and you can trust her honour?’

‘It is true,’ he said quietly, ‘she has been saved. More, she is now in London with the gentleman who has been her chief companion through all her trials. It is possible that she may be at Kemerton to-morrow.’

‘Thank you.’

Dahlia finished the piece, and rose from the piano.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

‘TO BEGUILF THE TIME, LOOK LIKE THE TIME.’

LEWIS RAPIER was never so much mistaken in his calculations as to what another person would do under given circumstances as he was in the present case with regard to Dahlia.

Yet this was one of his cynical theories—a theory which experience had made one of his firmest convictions.

‘It is remarkable,’ he said to a friend who had been complaining of a fair one’s falsehood, ‘it is remarkable how often clever men in general, and clever rogues in particular, are outwitted by women. There are countless instances of men going to the deuce for women or on account of them ; but there are few



women doing the same for men—except in fiction. The truth is that in the relations of the sexes it is the men who are sentimental; women have a practical regard for the conveniences and comforts of life. The youth thinks of marriage in association with some being to whom he shall devote all his energies, and who will be the inspiration of his noblest efforts; the maiden thinks of it in its association with a house and its belongings, and the impression it will make upon her friends. Look at girls, as children even playing at housekeeping—they have miniature furniture, pots, pans, and tea sets, and dolls, but the husband is left out of count in the game, or is getting a scolding for some misdemeanour.’

‘That is not what our books tell us.’

‘It is what experience tells us, only we are afraid to own it. Romance in verse and prose has taught us to look for quite the reverse of this, but that is because it is the province of

romance to paint for us the ideal of womanhood in its good and bad forms, and the ideal of anything is always an exaggeration. The average woman is no more a gentle Una than she is a Delilah. But men go on believing in Una; vanity makes every fellow think he has found her, and so makes him an easy victim to unexpected deceit.'

'I can't see much consolation in your theory,' said his friend lugubriously.

'Only the consolation of knowing that you have so many fellow-sufferers. The lesson is, keep your eyes always wide open when dealing with women, and you will be the less likely to be outwitted again.'

He implied, of course, that his eyes were always wide open to all the wiles of woman-kind; and so they were, but they did not enable him to see through Dahlia's present conduct.

When she rose from the piano he expected

her vexation to appear in some coldness to her husband and indifference to his guests. At least she would display 'sulks' in some way. All his experience of the petulant passion of her nature justified him in anticipating this course.

He was, therefore, at first surprised and next interested in observing that she was even more attentive than usual to Stephen, and all that a genial hostess could be to her friends. She was perfect.

'A sudden access of attention means mischief,' was his mental comment.

Two gentlemen besides Rapier were to remain for the night, and when the other guests had gone they adjourned with the host and Jim to smoke.

Dahlia's countenance changed; the smiles gave place to an expression of serious resolution. Unobserved by the girls she beckoned to Mrs. Meredith, senior, who followed her out

of the room and upstairs. Dahlia led the way into her mother-in-law's parlour.

Then she spoke in a low, steady voice, her lips, which appeared to have grown thin and cold, scarcely parting to emit the words :

'I want you to stay here till I come back. I am going out.'

'Out, Dahlia! and at this time of night?' exclaimed the astonished dowager.

'I shall not be more than an hour gone. Stay here, and should Stephen ask for me, say that I am with you talking about house affairs—anything, only don't let him know I am gone.'

'But, my dear child——'

'Don't ask me why, mother. There is no harm—it concerns Stephen's happiness and mine.'

'But you must take someone with you—take me—take Smalley.'

'No, no, there's no necessity. You need not be in the least alarmed. I shall be back in an hour.'



‘But if Stephen finds out?’

‘You must prevent that for the present. By-and-by I will explain to you both why I am going and where to.’

‘Do be persuaded to let Smalley accompany you.’

‘No. . . .’ But Dahlia paused, turning something over in her mind. Then: ‘Do you think you and I could get Smalley to do something for me that is intended for his master’s benefit, but which he must know nothing about for a few hours?’

‘He would do anything for you, I am sure, child, only he would feel like me, that mystery seldom means good, and never brings good to anyone.’

Dahlia laughed, a hard, steely, little laugh which made the listener feel more uncomfortable than at first, and still more unwilling to assent to this singular proceeding of her daughter-in-law. She had been willing enough

to enter into a sort of conspiracy to bring about her marriage with Stephen ; and she was proud of the success which had been in every way a benefit to them all. But she had a decided objection to enter into another conspiracy with the nature and object of which she was entirely unacquainted.

‘ You dear, stupid, kind-hearted, suspicious old mother,’ said Dahlia, playfully, as she put her hands on the dowager’s shoulders, and touched her brow with cold lips. ‘ You yourself have told me that there must be confidences between man and wife which they can share with nobody—not even with parents. Now this is one of them. What he does not know I am doing to-night, he will know to-morrow or next day, and thank me for doing for his sake. Are you satisfied ? ’

‘ I wish I could understand,’ pleaded the puzzled mother.

‘ But you can’t understand—at present that


is. You may, however, know this, that what I am going to do I would rather not do if I were thinking only of myself; it is for his sake. Now are you satisfied?

‘I suppose I must be, and of course I know that you care too much for him to do him any harm intentionally. . But you know, child, experience has taught me that there is more mischief worked between husband and wife by good intentions, which are gone about in an underhand way than by anything else in the world.’

‘Please don’t scold to-night, mother, and you’ll find me very good to-morrow,’ said the humble young wife, prettily.

‘Ah, that *to-morrow*, child, is Satan’s own carriage, and those who ride in it never have a happy journey. Had you not better stay at home to night?’

Dahlia’s mood changed again, and she stamped on the floor like a spoiled child in a temper.




'I am going,' she cried. 'If you will not help me to do what I have to do quietly, then so much the worse for Stephen, and so much the worse for me.'

The mother was calmer now, and regarded her with kindly interest as she said regretfully :—

'You are asking me to do a very odd thing, Dahlia, and I am sure Stephen will not be pleased with the way you are setting about this journey, no matter what good it may bring. But as you are so earnest about it, and as I know you cannot mean any harm, I will do what you wish, and hope no ill may come of it.'

'Thank you, thank you,' she said excitedly ; 'remember he is not to know I am out of the house.'

She hurried away to her dressing-room. There she quickly changed her evening dress for a warm walking robe ; over that she put a dark ulster, and next put on a tweed travelling




hat, so that at night she might have been mistaken for a young lad.

She looked over the banisters ; there was no one on the staircase, and she passed down quickly. She had a plan ready if she should meet any of the servants ; she was to say that she was going to play a trick on the young ladies ; and as she had been known in former days to play all sorts of odd pranks, that explanation would be sufficient to account for her appearance in walking attire.

The excuse was not needed ; there was no one in the hall. She passed the library door, hearing sounds of laughter and smelling tobacco, and entered the little room next to it which she had appropriated as her boudoir. She closed the door and locked it on the inside, but instantly unlocked it.

‘ If he should find it fastened inside he might suspect something.’

The French window gave to the lawn. The



shutters were closed, and the alarm bell hung in its place on the iron crossbar. That was for a moment a little puzzling ; how to leave the shutters unfastened without the fact being noticed by anyone who entered.

The puzzle was promptly solved.

Grasping the tongue of the bell with one hand, and the spring with the other she lifted it from the socket and placed it on the table without noise. The crossbar was removed in the same cautious manner, the shutters were opened and the window fastenings undone. Then she drew the large heavy velvet curtains, which had been a special fancy of her own, close together, leaving space enough between them and the window for her to stand.

No one within the room would have guessed that the shutters were open without drawing the curtains.

She passed out, closing the window carefully after her, and latching it so that the wind might



not betray the unguarded window. Then she paused to draw breath.

The night was bitterly cold, but her cheeks were all aflame. The moon was in its second quarter, and the frosted ground glistened as if strewn with diamonds.

‘I can walk to Kemerton in half an hour,’ she reflected. ‘I could ride in half the time. That would give me half an hour there, and still allow me to be back before he is likely to ask a second time for me.’


She walked with quick decisive steps towards the stables. Some of the men were still there, as the lights indicated. She could not obtain any animal from the stables then without making herself and her night excursion known.

But she remembered that to make room for the horses of the visitors a favourite Shetland pony of hers had been removed to the cow-house. She went straight to the place, which

had been closed for the night. One of the doors, however, was only bolted.

Her shaggy friend knew the sound of its mistress's voice, and gave a short neigh of recognition when she spoke. She led it out by the halter, round the barn and on to the road.

One of Dahlia's real accomplishments was that of good horsemanship, and she knew that she could manage this pony easily with the halter and her voice. When a child she had often ridden a horse for pleasure round the field with no other harness than the halter; and she had no fear in trying her riding skill in the same primitive fashion now that she was a woman and had a serious object in view.



CHAPTER XXIX.

THE NIGHT RIDE.


SHE brought the obedient Shetland up to a field gate, then placed her foot on one of the bars, and raised herself easily on to the pony's bare back.

The animal really seemed to enjoy the fun of it. As soon as he felt her on his back he gave a flourish of his tail, a slight movement of his hind legs to suggest that he was waiting for orders; then in obedience to an indicative motion of the halter, and an authoritative 'Away, my boy!' he started at once into an easy canter which was a convenient speed and a comfortable motion for a rider without a saddle.

There were not many turnings in the road to Kemerton: the distance was a little over two miles. Her way lay between thick hedges with trees at intervals—beech, elm, chestnut, and willow. In the moonlight their shadows interlaced across the path as if they would bar the way of the adventurous lady.

But it was eleven o'clock and there was nobody on the road. She might have been the last of a plague-stricken country, riding in quest of some companions for her solitude.

How bright the stars were this night! Were they taking advantage of the half-lustre of the moon to show what they could do unaided? How clearly cut the shadows on the ground! But how sad was the feeling of everything around her, as if nature rebuked the daring nightrider, and challenged the honesty of her purpose in being out there when all honest folk were a-bed.



Her teeth were set ; her eyes gazed steadily forward ; the pony cantered on as if he enjoyed this witch's frolic ; and Dahlia in her passion was indifferent to the influences of picturesque scenery or of atmosphere.

Then came the long line of beeches which bordered Kemerton Park, and were, next to the Green Lane, the pride of the estate. She did not think of regarding the strange outlines which the trees presented in this light. She wanted to reach the house and to get back to Derewood within the hour.

She did not want to disturb the lodge-keeper, and, besides, she did not want the lodgekeeper to know that she was there.

What a capital pony that was, and how steadily he kept up his pace ! He should have an extra feed of corn for this.

So, she opened a gate leading into the park itself, and boldly galloped across it.

The house came in view. There were

very few lights, and there was a general sense of repose about it which compelled her to check the pony and pause.

She had considered it all as she came along; it was of no use seeing Brassey, the butler; he was devoted to Ruth. But Mrs. Smith, the housekeeper, was jealous of Brassey for foolish reasons—envy of his supremacy with the master especially—and because he was the humble servant of Ruth, Mrs. Smith was devoted to Dahlia, who was, she insisted, the proper mistress of the household.

It was Mrs. Smith Dahlia wanted to see.

But, as in the best considered plans, when the moment for putting them into execution comes there is discovered some trifling flaw which may mar the whole work, so Dahlia had to pause to consider the question whether she should go to the hall door or to the servants' door. Her appearance at that time of

night would create surprise and speculation at any rate; by entering at the servants' door she might bribe and persuade whoever she saw to be silent for the present. But when the visit came to be reported afterwards, as she knew it must be, she would appear mean indeed to slink into the house of the man who was supposed to be her father, and who accepted the responsibilities of that relationship—to slink into his house as if she were an outcast.

After tying the Shetland in the shrubbery, so that her primitive harness might not excite additional surprise, she went up to the principal door.

She rang and knocked. After a little delay the door was opened by a footman, who had not yet succeeded in completely adjusting his coat, which had been off for the night.

She stepped boldly into the hall.

‘I am sorry to disturb you so late, Sellars,

but I wish to see Mrs. Smith immediately. Do you know if she is in her room ? ’

The man had been inclined to be sulky with this late visitor, but as soon as he recognised her he became respectful.

‘ Yes, m’m, she is. Will you step into the blue room, and I’ll tell her ? ’

‘ No, thank you, Sellars ; I will go to her ; but as I don’t want to bother more of your people than is necessary, will you wait here to let me out ? ’

‘ Certainly, m’m, certainly, with pleasure,’ answered the man, remembering past tips and grateful for those to come.

Dahlia was perfectly acquainted with the way. She stepped quickly along the hall, opened the door which communicated with the servants’ quarter, and, without knocking, entered the housekeeper’s room.

That important personage, although a good-natured and kind-hearted being when she had



her own way, was most particular about the observance of all the formalities and courtesies of that somewhat vaguely defined circle which she called 'the best society.' Therefore when her privacy was thus abruptly invaded she adjusted her glasses with much care in order to have a good view of the bold intruder.

'Bless me!—Mrs. Meredith!' she exclaimed, rising instantly; 'what can have brought you here so late? Is there anything wrong at the Grange?'

'Nothing wrong I am happy to say. Thank you, I will not sit down. I came to inquire about your visitor. Has she arrived yet and when do you expect her?'

Mrs. Smith was a woman of fair education, who, when left a widow with one child and quite unprovided for—her husband had been a solicitor's clerk—managed to support herself and to pay her son's way through school until he was able to earn his own living. His early


death in a railway accident obliged the widow to continue dependent on her own exertions for a livelihood. By Mr. Basnett's recommendation she was appointed housekeeper at Kemerton, and there found an agreeable and permanent home.

She had watched Dahlia growing up from childhood, and had taken a motherly interest in her. She was in no way blind to the lady's imperfections as child, girl, and woman; but she continued to be fond of her and ready to serve her.

So now she divined at once that there was something more in this late visit than the mere interest in the expected guest. She saw the anxiety which Dahlia thought she was concealing so cleverly.

'I understood that nobody was to be told about her coming,' said Mrs. Smith.

'Oh, but of course it was not to be kept a secret—especially from me.'



‘I suppose not, since you already know about it. She has not come yet, but she is to be here about ten o’clock to-morrow, and so far as I can make out she is to leave again very soon. We only got notice from Mr. Dottridge yesterday to have the rooms ready.’

‘Then he is coming back, too?’


‘Dear me, yes, haven’t you heard that? He is such a queer man! Do you know where he has been for the last twelve months?’

‘No.’

‘No more do we; but he found Miss Clark in some foreign part, and brought her to London when we all thought she was dead, and were beginning to think the master dead too. Wasn’t it he who told you they were coming?’

‘No, I have heard nothing from him, and I do not wish to intrude upon him until he bids me come. But I do want to see Ruth as soon as she arrives.’

‘Can I give her any message?’




‘Yes ; tell her that I came to bid her welcome the moment I heard of her coming, although it was so late and——. You say she is to be here about ten to-morrow ?’

‘Maybe a little before. They are to drive from Bishop’s Stortford.’

‘Will you give me a sheet of paper and a pen, Mrs. Smith ?’

The writing materials were supplied. Dahlia had not expected to see Ruth that night ; she had only expected to learn the hour of her arrival, and she had mentally composed, amended, and improved what she was to write many times before she took the pen in her hand. So the lines were rapidly written.

‘Dear Ruth,—You can understand how I rejoice with so many others at your miraculous escape. You can understand how much I have to say to you, and how much I desire to see you, the instant you arrive, BEFORE YOU SEE ANYONE ELSE.



‘I ask you to meet me to-morrow at noon at the Holly Bush ring in the Green Lane. When we meet I will tell you why I ask you to see me there rather than in the house—that is, at first.

‘Do not fail, I implore you.

‘Your ever affectionate

‘DAHLIA MEREDITH.’

She folded this slowly and placed it in an envelope, as if meditating till the last moment whether or not there were any further inducement she could add to make sure that Ruth would keep the appointment. She could think of nothing else, and she closed the envelope.

‘You used to say, Mrs. Smith, that you would always be ready to do me a good turn if you could?’

‘And I say it again with all my heart,’ replied the old housekeeper warmly. ‘I see you are in anxiety about something, but, bless us, I hope there is nothing particular the matter

that you need the help of anybody out of your own house !’

‘Oh, nothing at all alarming,’ said Dahlia hastily and smiling reassuringly. ‘I only want you to promise to place this letter yourself in Miss Clark’s hands the moment she arrives, and send some one to me with the answer immediately.’

Mrs. Smith drew a long breath of relief.

‘Eh, deary, I am glad to hear it’s no more than that. For of course you know we were all aware that Miss Clark and Mr. Meredith were almost as good as——’

‘Yes, yes, that is the old story,’ interrupted the young wife, impatiently ; ‘I suppose these things happen in most people’s lives and are got over somehow. You will do what I ask ?’

‘She shan’t be ten minutes in the house before she gets your letter, and I have somebody started on the road post haste with the answer.’


‘Thank you, very, very much. You cannot imagine what a great kindness you are doing me by this little service.’

‘I’m sure I wish it was more, so that you might see how pleased I am to do it for you. Won’t you take a cup of tea before you go? The night is so cold.’

‘Nothing, thank you ; I have already stayed longer than I intended. Good ‘night, and thanks again. . . . Yes, the night is cold,’ she added to herself with a slight shudder, as if the fingers of the frost were touching her heart.

But she took leave of the housekeeper with a smiling face, and the old lady parted with her in the hall without a suspicion that the mistress of the Grange had come hither unattended. She would have been shocked indeed had she known in what manner the journey had been made.

‘Can I see you to your carriage, ma’am?’ inquired Sellars as he opened the door.



‘You are to close the door after me immediately,’ she said, dropping something into his hand.

He obeyed her.


She mounted the shaggy Shetland and rode back as fast as she had come. Those stars up there so clear and cold seemed to form into letters and words, spelling out the sentence which haunted her.

‘You cannot doubt your husband’s faith, and you can trust her honour.’

Could she?

To-morrow she would know. To-morrow she would put them to the proof, and on the result depended her happiness—and theirs!’

Out of their own mouths she would be satisfied whether or not he was loyal; if he were so, then she did not mind much what Ruth might do or what became of her. The test she was applying was a severe one, but only the severest test could give her satisfaction.



She took the pony back to his place, and again promised that he should have an extra feed of corn to reward him for his faithful services. There were none of the men about the stables now, and all the lights were out. But when she got to the front of the house she was soon assured that the gentlemen were still in the library. The window had been opened to ventilate the room, and she could hear Stephen's voice.

That was a relief; she had managed everything so cleverly and quickly that no one in the house, except her mother-in-law would have the least knowledge of her absence.

She entered the boudoir; the heavy curtains were drawn, and the lamp was burning low, exactly as she had left them. Then, as she proceeded cautiously to refasten the shutters and replace the alarm-bell, she experienced an uncomfortable, 'creepy' sensation, such as a thief might feel when on the point of complet-

ing his crime and only one more trifling act has to be performed in order to secure his prize.

She was, in fact, becoming nervous. The excitement and action of what she had had to do out of doors had sustained her; now that she had accomplished her task and had only to replace the bell, the fancy took possession of her that there was someone in the darkened room behind her, and that a hand was about to grasp her shoulder.

‘This is absurd,’ she muttered, making an effort to overcome the feeling.

With a firm hand she replaced the bell and walked boldly to the table. Having turned up the lamp she glanced hastily round. Of course there was no one in the room but herself, and she gave a little contemptuous laugh at her own foolish fancy.

She flung her hat and ulster on a chair in a corner, and took a seat on the couch, intending

to rest for a few moments to collect her thoughts, in order that she might appear quite calm when she rejoined Mrs. Meredith, the elder.

She was thankful that the adventure was over, and that her absence not having been discovered there would be no necessity to give Stephen any explanation. She was exceedingly glad of that, for she was determined that she would not tell him any lies—if she could help it!

To this one of her good resolutions had become modified.

She was startled by a sound like somebody breathing softly behind the screen in front of the fireplace.

CHAPTER XXX.

A PASSAGE AT ARMS.

HER heart bounded in her throat ; but that was only momentary ; for however much she might quake at danger she could control herself when actually face to face with it. Here she had not much to fear : only some burglar she had to confront—some fellow who had discovered the unsecured window—and Stephen and his friends were in the next room whilst the bell-pull was within reach. She placed her hand upon the latter safeguard.

‘ Who is there ? ’ she demanded resolutely.

She did not pull the bell for it flashed upon her that if she gave the alarm she would be obliged to explain how the window came to be


open. It might be possible to avoid this if she could only get rid of the ruffian without calling assistance. He could not yet have done much mischief.

‘Don’t be frightened—it’s only me,’ said the voice of Mr. Rapier from behind the screen.

He came quietly out from his hiding-place, and he was *not* smiling. That was an ominous sign ; still more ominous, he looked serious and sympathetic. Whatever had been the feelings with which she had regarded him formerly, she did not like him now, and she hated him whenever he assumed an air of sympathy.

She watched him with curious eyes as he advanced quietly to her side. She did not rise ; he remained standing, and the light of the lamp fell full on their faces.

She was pale, and a little frightened ; her eyes blinked as if the light were too much for them.



‘Shall I put the shade on the lamp?’ he inquired considerably.

‘Do not trouble yourself,’ she answered, ringing the bell as she rose.

Resentment at his intrusion had overcome all other considerations.

‘I am sorry you have done that,’ he said coolly: ‘it was unnecessary to make the servant aware of your—escapade.’

There was no sneer in the word over which he had hesitated, and he was undisturbed by the summons of the servant, except on her account. His manner was that of one who is conscious of acting rightly and kindly under peculiar circumstances.

‘It is necessary to let my husband know that one of his guests has entered my room at midnight uninvited.’

She was in a passion and with difficulty subdued it to the semblance of calmness. She did not even remember at the moment that



she was about to destroy her own plans completely.

‘When you direct the servant to request your husband to come here—he is only in the next room—I shall ask her at the same time to desire his mother to accompany him.’

She was startled, and reminded of all that she had been doing—all that she hoped to do.

‘What do you mean?’ she asked huskily.

‘That I am here by her instructions to protect, and here of my own will to assist you if you will permit me.’

The servant knocked at the door.

It was Rapier who said ‘Come in,’ with placid promptitude.

Dahlia swayed for a moment between her determination to send for Stephen at once and her anxiety not to upset her own schemes without good reason.

‘Tell your master that I wish to see him at once,’ was what she had intended to say.

This was what she did say :

‘Tell Mrs. Meredith that I will be with her in a few minutes.’

The servant retired, and the door was again closed upon the two strange friends.

She had stooped to obey this man once more. She was sorry that she had stooped ; she was ashamed of having done so. But it was the last time, and so much depended on her being able to carry her plans out to the end as she had laid them ! The enforced submission was humiliating, and that increased her anger.

For the moment she could not speak. Her mother-in-law had betrayed her, and that fact added to her indignation. But for this treachery all would have gone as she had hoped and desired.

Poor Mrs. Meredith had been acting as she thought most kindly and discreetly on Dahlia’s behalf. She had been anxious about her,



anxious that her absence should not be discovered ; and, adopting Dahlia's own method of construing a promise, believed that although she had pledged herself not to let Stephen know anything, she was not therefore bound to be silent to everybody.

So she had sent for Rapier, who had been such a good friend to her and to Dahlia before the marriage.

‘You have acted most sensibly,’ he said approvingly, ‘on everyone’s account ; it is best that no disturbance should be made. On the face of it, you have every reason to be indignant with me for being here without your knowledge ; but permit me to explain——’

‘I will not hear you,’ she interrupted angrily ; but changing her mind—‘Yes, I will. What have you to say ?’

‘Only this : Mrs. Meredith desired me to assist her in preventing your husband from discovering that you had gone out at this late

hour—it is somewhat unusual, you know. She was afraid that we would break up for the night before you returned. I pledged myself that they should not, and I have arranged the party so that they are not likely to separate for some time unless I set them free.’

‘Indeed!’ (this with scornful indifference.)

‘Yes. I have set Carrill and Holcroft to play Nap, Mr. Meredith to act as umpire, and I have secretly made a wager with Carrill that he will leave the room before he wins or loses ten pounds at sixpenny points. He is a stubborn beggar, and I know that he will not rise from his chair until he has won the wager or I forfeit it. The expedient is simple, is it not? I assure you it is a completely successful one. They have been playing now for half-an-hour, and it will take them at least two hours more to finish. So you are quite safe.’

‘I did not know that I was in any danger.



Is your explanation finished—I hope that will not take so long as the game?’

‘There is only one thing more to add. I promised Mrs. Meredith that I should wait here for you and let you know that all was as you wished.’

‘How did you know that this was the place to wait for me?’ she demanded sharply.

‘By a simple calculation : you wished to leave the house and to return unobserved by any one ; I remembered that the boudoir window opened upon the lawn. I came here and found as I expected everything cleverly arranged for your re-entrance without giving the servants any trouble. I have fulfilled my promise ; your absence is known only to Mrs. Meredith and myself.’

‘I am extremely obliged.’ (Oh, she was so sarcastic !—but writhing with vexation all the time.) ‘Is there anything more to detain you?’

‘Nothing, unless you have anything to say to me,’ he answered slowly, after surveying her face for an instant with much gravity.

‘I have something to say,’ she burst out indignantly, ‘and if it has to be repeated it shall be by my husband.’

He bowed, and moved a chair towards her, saying quietly :

‘You have been standing all this time—now, please, do not be annoyed with me. I really wish to be useful to you.’

‘And I do not require or desire your services,’ she retorted.

‘You said so before, and yet you sent for me, and—I know that my coming has been of use to you.’

She bit her lips, flushed and became pale. This man sometimes inspired her with a kind of superstitious awe of him ; he always hit the truth so directly.

But she was not to turn back now. She

had made efforts to shake off his influence before ; this time she would do it. The passion within was strong as ever, but she spoke with more self-command.

‘I wish this conversation to be our last on a disagreeable subject,’ she said. ‘I do not know what your purpose may be, but I want you to understand clearly my position in regard to you.’

‘I think I do understand it perfectly,’ he said coldly, and looking steadily into her eyes. ‘You once professed to—well, we shall say to have a particular regard for me. Your lips, your letters, declared that frequently, and you changed your mind almost as frequently—in fact whenever you found another who paid you any special attention. But you were as fickle to them as to me, only I bore with you more patiently than they. I did not interfere. At length came Stephen Meredith’s turn, and your own interests bound you to him.’


‘That is false,’ she cried, unable to remain silent any longer, although he had so adroitly turned the position that she seemed to be the culprit and he the accuser.

‘At first it was so ; that some stronger tie grew within you afterwards, I believe, and on that account I aided you to become his wife—setting aside my own feelings and thinking only of your happiness. Now that your object is gained you would cast me out of your sight that you might not be reminded of all this : and yet you would have me obey your beck whenever there arises any difficulty which you think I can help you over.’

It was horribly true, and the man’s cold, clear voice, his merciless words, stung her with bitter recollections of past follies.

She rested her hand on the back of the chair which a little while ago he had offered her.

‘I thought—I understood—you promised that all this was to be forgotten.’



‘I have no desire to remind you of it, and would not, but that you yourself recall it.’

‘Since I have done so, then let me recall more,’ she said, reasserting herself, and remembering the purpose which had caused her to bring about this unfortunate recrimination.

‘Silence would be best, and it is in your power to command it.’

‘I hope so—if it is not now it shall be in the future. I must ask you to remember that you found in me a foolish school girl. Your friendship with Mr. Dottridge gave you frequent opportunities of seeing me. Your attentions flattered me, and at one time I did think that I—liked you. It was because I had no real love for you that I was fickle as you call it. And you knew that my feelings were only those of a giddy girl who had had no opportunity of testing her own nature.’

‘Your protestations then were false from the beginning?’


‘False—but because I did not know what they meant, not because I intended to be false. You proposed a secret marriage; luckily I refused to take that step and compelled you to speak to my guardian.’

‘I did so.’

‘And then your conduct towards me changed, and you agreed to sacrifice yourself to my future well-being! You were most generous! Most considerate! Do you think I do not understand why you were so generous?’

‘You ought to understand, for I explained to you then what I have since proved, that my regard for you was such that it enabled me to place the consideration of your future before and above any selfish ideas of my own. Besides, you had told me with your charming frankness that you no longer cared for me as you used to do.’

There was a touch of contempt in voice and look as she responded :




‘That was not the true reason for your ready change. When you spoke to Mr. Dottridge you learned that my fortune depended upon my marriage with Stephen Meredith—that was the true reason for your generous conduct!’

It was blow for blow, but he was not in the least disconcerted, only silent, regarding her with an expression of admiration in his eyes. He could afford to admire her cleverness, his own position was so secure.

She went on :

‘You can annoy, perhaps pain my husband, and make me miserable, by telling him about my folly, and by showing him my wretched, pitiful, silly letters. But you can gain nothing by it, except the knowledge that you have caused us suffering which you, of your own accord, promised to spare us. What then?—our suffering can be only for a time, and I shall myself be the first to tell him



everything. I would have told him before, but that he desired me to be silent.'

'And why should you disobey him now? Why should you imagine that I mean to break my promise? I have made no signs of an intention to do so.'

'You have made many signs: the threat is always in your mind if not in your words. You would not dare to take your place in this room, to spy upon my actions, if it were not that you believe you can insult me with impunity because I fear what you might tell him. You are mistaken: and once for all I warn you that if you again presume to interfere in my affairs, Mr. Meredith shall himself deal with you as you deserve.'

Without a word he turned and walked slowly towards the door.

She was conscious that in her excitement she had expressed her defiance with unnecessary and ineffective passion. His strange,

silent manner chilled her. She wanted to know what he was going to do.

‘You understand?’ she said impatiently, as his hand was on the door.

‘I don’t; but I am going to ask Mr. Meredith to help me,’ he said quietly, and paused.

‘Why are you going for him!’ she exclaimed, startled.

‘That he may hear your accusations, and deal with me as I deserve.’

She did not speak. Surely it had become suddenly very cold. Was it possible to bear this extra strain? Would Stephen stand it at the time when all his liking for her—she knew it was not love yet—and his honour were about to undergo the cruel ordeal of to-morrow? What this man could say would pain him to the quick; sting him perhaps to the pitch of frenzy in which he might speak the words she dreaded to hear—that he could never care for

her now; that he must live in perpetual regret for the haste which had caused him to lose Ruth.

That would kill her. But she would not plead for any mercy at Rapier's hands.

After a pause, he :

'Shall I go or stay? You must speak the one word or the other. . . . Your silence will mean "go" to me.'

She saw Stephen's face as he listened to this man, as he read the letters she had written in those foolish days; she saw his proud nature writhing as he discovered that all the tenderness she professed for him had been professed for another, and he would not pause to consider how different it all was, then and now.

'Stay!'

The word was a hysterical gasp.

'I am kinder to you than you are to yourself,' he said, returning, and he seemed to be in earnest. 'I have been your friend and mean

to be your friend. Therefore I have not and never had the slightest intention of raking up old stories which you wish to forget, and I have no particular reason to remember. What purpose could I serve by frightening you ?'

'You have a purpose,' she said under her breath. She checked herself there; why should she aggravate him by adding that she knew he had designs of some kind upon Mr. Dottridge's fortune, and required her aid in some way to carry them into effect ?

'Whatever purposes I may have there is nothing in them to harm or disturb you. You will find out by-and-by that whatever I do will be to your advantage.'

'I want nothing from you.'

'You do not know yet. But at any rate let us get rid of this nonsensical fancy of yours that I wish to threaten you. I am not a villain in a melodrama, and I don't preserve a woman's letters to use them against her when



she offends me. Your letters are all destroyed.'

'Is that true?' she cried, her eyes flashing with delight.

'Perfectly true, but as you think so meanly of me, my word cannot be much of a guarantee to you. Such is the fact, however. There may be one or two notes in my desk, and as soon as I return to town they shall be hunted up and sent to you. Unless you come and search my den yourself I can give you no better proof of the fact that your letters are destroyed.'

There was a tinge of impatience in his manner which was more convincing to her than his mere assurance would have been.

'I believe you, and I thank you,' she said with real gratitude.

'I am glad I am believed on that score. Now, for another matter: are you still afraid of my friendship? Do you still repudiate it?'

‘I never was afraid of it, and I have no desire to reject it, since we understand the conditions on which I can still call you friend.’

‘They are understood perfectly; and you will find that you have more need of me than you suspect. Your position is a troublesome one, and I sympathise with you sincerely.’

‘I do not want——’ she began with an irritable gesture of the hand.

‘You do not yet know what you may want. Surely it is the part of a friend to warn you not to do anything which may forfeit your husband’s esteem.’

‘That, sir, is my care.’

‘Certainly, but you may repeat the mistake you have made to-night. You have been to Kemerton making inquiries about Ruth Clark; the time and manner in which you have done this will suggest feelings on your part in regard to her which may harm you in his thoughts.’

She knew that he was speaking wisely—that he was only giving voice to her own fears. But she said, with affected sarcasm :

‘What strange things you think, Mr. Rapier!’

‘What strange things you do, Dahlia—I beg your pardon—Mrs. Meredith. However, I have warned you, and you will not find me interfere again until you ask me. One thing more I must say—there will be no real security for your happiness until she is married.’

‘Ah! If she were married! Will she ever marry?’

He had struck the note which roused her intensest interest. He was right; she would not be assured of her happiness until Ruth was married or—dead.

‘I hope she will,’ he replied. ‘Would you be glad?’

‘I would give all I possess to bring it about.’

‘Then you would not refuse to help the man who is wooing her with some prospect of success?’

‘There is nothing I would not try to do for him!’

‘Then you will help me?’

‘You!’ she exclaimed, astounded. Among all her suspicions of the motives which actuated him, she had never thought of this one.

‘Yes, me; but it is a secret as yet, only Ruth and now you know of my—ambition, we will call it; and I trust you will keep the secret until you have permission to make it known. You see I can trust you.’

‘And she is aware of your intention?’

‘Yes, and I have no doubt will in time consent. Will you help me?’

‘With all my heart and strength,’ she answered cordially, and she even regained a degree of sprightliness.

Ah, we are allies and friends again, then,’

he said, smiling for the first time during the interview, and taking her hand.

‘For this end, at any rate, we are allies.’

‘I told you that whatever my purposes were they were to your advantage. Should I succeed in marrying her it will be the greatest service I have ever done you.’

‘Except in not marrying me. Good-night.’


Mr. Rapier was content. He went into the library to release his unconscious warders.

CHAPTER XXXI.

IN THE GREEN LANE.


IN all the county there was not a more picturesque scene than the Green Lane of Kemerton.

It had originally formed part of the cart road to the Home Farm, but now the road wound past it in another direction, and the green lane was carpeted with grass. The opening from the road was scarcely visible in the summer time, for the hawthorn hedges grew thick and high, and almost hid the wooden gate, while drooping boughs of oak and beech met over it. The high banks on each side of the lane were overgrown with bramble, ground ivy, periwinkle, and many varieties of fern, and



crowned with hedges which grew in unrestrained luxury of verdure, while oaks and elms, chestnuts, and beeches interlaced their branches overhead. Entering by the leafy archway, and standing in the dim mysterious light, one might fancy oneself in some great cathedral fashioned by Nature, or existing only in Dreamland.


About half way through the lane the high banks ceased, and the hedges curved gently outwards, forming a semicircle on either side. Inner semicircles of holly bushes grew at the edge of what seemed to be a natural hollow, in which the turf was as smooth as that on a well-kept lawn. Tradition ascribed the formation of this ring to the fairies, but it had really been the fanciful idea of a former mistress of Kemerton. A fallen tree lay on one side, and served as a seat for those who wished to linger in the Holly Bush Ring; mosses and ferns flourished round its sloping banks. The elm



that had replaced the fallen veteran was still so young that its arms could not reach the great chestnut over the way, and so it came to pass that one side of the Holly Bush Ring was shaded, while the other was bright in sunlight or moonlight.


It had been a favourite resort of Dahlia's when at Kemerton, and she had had a rough shelter constructed under the chestnut tree, in which she spent many a summer afternoon reading lazily or falling asleep, for it was cool and restful there with the thick foliage gently rustling overhead, and the drowsy hum of the insects lulling one to slumber. There was an invisible brooklet, too, that babbled stories to the flowers. She had even had a gap cleverly made in the hedge behind the Holly Bushes, so that she might take a short way home through the fields.

In the springtime the lane was bright and merry with the gay twitterings of the happy



birds, and the shadows flickering on the soft green turf. Then the tender leaves were not big enough to keep out the strong sun's rays which darted in to kiss the modest flowers hiding in the shady banks. When winter with its relentless Puritanism had dismantled the great cathedral, King Frost would often turn it into a fairy palace by weaving a roof of snow; but the sun would melt it away, and there remained only the framework traced clearly against the sky in the moonlight.

The old and unromantic were prosaic enough to call the Green Lane a damp, cold-catching place, and carefully avoided it in winter and at eventide. On the day Dahlia had fixed for the meeting, however, there was no need to fear the damp, for the ground was hard bound by the frost and the grass crunched crisp beneath the feet of walkers. The dark trunks of the trees rose on either side like rough columns from their continuous pedestal



of bank and hedge, while the arching branches were silvered by the hoar frost and glistened at intervals in the morning sunshine. In the Holly Bush Ring itself King Frost had been working with a will, for the prickly leaves were cased in silver and sparkling with diamonds, and the red berries flushed a brighter red with exultation.


Into the Green Lane stepped Stephen Meredith a little before noon. He was walking briskly; exercise in the keen bracing atmosphere sent the blood dancing healthfully through his veins, and made a glow on his cheeks, which had been somewhat pale of late. The exhilarating influence of the atmosphere caused him, as he marched along, to whistle involuntarily snatches of old country melodies for which he had a fancy. He used to whistle always as he walked through the fields before misfortune had laid its hand so heavily on Derewood.

But the heaviest sorrow cannot keep its

perch steadily on healthy shoulders. A brisk walk on such a day as this, with a gleam or two of hope to help the winter sun to brighten the landscape, and care is unhorsed, for the time at least, whilst the nerves are strengthened for future combat with him.

The cattle plague had been stamped out ; the stock of Derewood was as large and as notable as ever, the failure of the last year's crop would probably be redeemed by the bounty of the coming season. The threatened ruin had been averted, and good luck appeared to have come back to the place since Stephen's marriage with Dahlia. There was much for which he had to be grateful to her, and every reason to try to forget—as he was trying with all his might—the one great shadow which lay upon his heart, and which no light could dispel.

Dahlia had been looking prettier than ever that morning, and, laughing, he had told her that she had skipped back into childhood, and



he was afraid she was going to become the romping girl who used to tease him by her pranks and capers.

‘Do you really think that, Stephen!’ she cried, clapping her hands gleefully.

‘I don’t think it—I am afraid of it,’ was the joking reply.

Then she came up to him with mock solemnity and placed her hands on his shoulders, gazing into his eyes with an earnestness which even he, altogether off his guard, could see was not assumed.


‘Then, sir, be still more afraid, for I am going to have a frolic this very day.’

‘Don’t do anything desperate,’ he said, laughing at her whimsical manner.

‘I am not going to do it at all—you are to do it!’

‘Me? How?’

‘You are not to ask any questions; you are to obey—that is if you want to please me.’



And she pouted so prettily that he was obliged to kiss her.

‘Of course I want to please you, and I am ready to obey this mysterious command, even if it be to go and fight the dragon of Wantley.’

Her quick wit caught at the suggestion, and she felt the full force of the allegory, although he had no suspicion of its existence.

‘It is a dragon you have to fight and kill,’ she said, still presenting to him that air of whimsical solemnity she had assumed. ‘Listen : you are to go to the Holly Bush Ring, in the Green Lane of Kemerton. There where the fairies assemble at nights to hold high revel and lurk all day unseen by the vulgar eyes of man—there you are to present yourself this day at fifteen minutes before noon precisely. You are to take your stand where the old tree lies—you remember how often you found me there reading wicked books? There you must remain until you can see the queen of the fairies

in my green bower and hear what strange things she has to tell you.'

'I suppose you are to meet me there. But what has put this fancy into your head?'

'Remember, no questions,' she said, holding up her finger admonitorily. 'Will you be a good boy, and do as you are bid—to please me?'

'To be sure I will, and I can arrange to be thereabout at the time you mention.'

'You must not be thereabout—you must be in the place I mean, precisely at the hour I name.'

'Very well,' he said, much amused by her drollery, and concluding that she had made this mysterious assignation with him only in order that they might have a short ramble together in the favourite haunt of her girlhood.

So about the appointed time he was tramping up the Green Lane towards the Holly Bush Ring, and whistling as he went.

The sun flashed through the bare branches overhead, and their shadows made beautiful patterns on the crisp turf. The banks and the hedgerows completely screened from his view the park on one side and the ploughed fields on the other. An occasional gap revealed to him a long stretch of green or ridges of red earth, according to the side on which it opened.

He met no one, and on entering the famous Holly Bush Ring he found nobody waiting. He was a little after the precise moment she had insisted upon, and he had expected to find Dahlia seated on the fallen tree, prepared with a playful scolding for his tardiness.

But there was no sign of her, and he began to wonder if she had been only jesting all the time and did not mean to come at all.

Had it been the first of April he would have concluded at once that such was the case. He seated himself for a few minutes on the fallen tree and meditated in what manner he

could pay her out for keeping him waiting in the cold. If he could only hear her coming he might slip behind one of the inner lines of holly and suddenly rushing out upon her, pretend to be a satyr seizing his favourite nymph in the wood.

He rose to take a look up and down the lane. He advanced towards the corner formed where the semicircle sprung from the straight line of the hedge, and he saw a lady descending slowly into the hollow of the ring.

He halted: that was not Dahlia; and yet the outline of that graceful form in its quiet black dress was familiar to him.

His heart seemed to stand still and he felt giddy. Surely this was no deception of the senses!

The lady was looking away from him, as if her attention had been attracted by something on the other side of the lane. She turned towards him, and he recognised Ruth.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE HOLLY BUSH RING.

THEY stood, these two old friends, with a look of horror upon their faces. Their hearts gave one wild bound, then stopped, and presently began to beat again with that violence which is felt in throat and head.

Brought thus suddenly face to face at a spot so well known to them, the old time flashed back upon them—they lived in it again—they were lovers again, but conscious of the heavy shadow which lay over them.

It was a cruel moment, in which each lived the past over again.

How bright it was with hope; how brave were his resolves; how noble her devotion

They were to join hands, and so strive through life together, taking the good with the bad, and always content, sure that in calm or storm, love was their mainstay. There would be frost, of course, but spring and summer would come, and with them the new life of the year, showing that love had only been gathering strength to prove itself more beautiful than ever.

Then the autumn, with its many colours and its rich harvest, gathered in ; they, lovers still, and still hand in hand, looking back upon an honest life, happy in each other.

Ay, it was a pleasant time in which they had dreamed this sweet dream.

Merciless memory brought next the bitter reality. To Ruth the bitter parting. Then to him the story of her death, and his marriage : to her, the terrible voyage in the *Eucalyptus* ; the wreck ; the weary yearning to get home, to him ; and then the real death-stroke in the tidings that he was married !

‘God forgive me,’ she had cried, in the first moment of wild despair. ‘I think I could have borne better to have heard that he was dead.’

And now they stood there in the Holly Bush Ring with all these memories passing like an electric panorama through their minds: friends only they must be outwardly, but lovers in heart.

After that first cruel moment his impulse was to clasp her in his arms, to kiss her wildly and cry out for joy that he was permitted to see her safe again; and hers was to sink upon the ground and moan that she had not stayed with the brave old captain and his wife, and so have been spared this meeting.

But they did not obey their impulse.

He advanced slowly, and in the strange stillness which seemed to have fallen on the place the crunching sound which his steps made on the frosty earth was loud and discordant in their ears.

They could not speak, and their hands trembled as they met. He led her to the fallen tree, and even in that moment of trial, the mind mechanically attending to such a trifle of courtesy, he threw his handkerchief on the trunk, making a seat for her.


She was glad to sit down, for her limbs were faint. She needed a rest, and, bowing her head, she sought strength to bear this interview.

He stood looking at her, and trying to find speech. At length, one word broke the spell of silence :

‘ Ruth ! ’

She could not help trembling at the sound of his voice, it was so full of pain and love.

She rose, calm now, and looked earnestly into his eyes. He took both hands into his own, and kissed her. That was their welcome and their parting as lovers, for as their lips met they were conscious that it was for the last time.




‘I did not expect to see you here, Stephen,’ she said, finding voice, too, now, and the sound thrilled through him, filling him with sad longing, as the music of an old familiar air fills the exile with home-sickness and visions of his distant friends. ‘It was Dahlia I came to meet.’

‘You know all. . . . This is some foolish fancy of hers—meaning in her good nature to give us a pleasant surprise—I am afraid she has caused us both unnecessary pain.’

‘It would have been better if we had been prepared for this meeting,’ Ruth replied; adding in a low voice, ‘Better still, perhaps, if we had never met again.’

‘Never met again!—did you wish that, Ruth?’

‘At any rate, we should not have met so soon. I did not intend to see you until we had both had time to realise the new position in which we stand. We are friends now, Stephen—good, true friends.’



‘ Yes, friends—*only* friends.’

He spoke with a manly effort to control himself, and to accept the position calmly, as she was doing.

‘ We cannot hope to find it easy to do that at first,’ she went on ; ‘ we cannot hope to meet at first without painful remembrances ; but by-and-by we will have overcome them, and we will have learned to be grateful.’

He could not stand that ; her voice was faltering, and he knew that she was trying to say what she did not feel in the vain hope of comforting him.

‘ Don’t speak that way, Ruth,’ he said, with subdued passion in voice and look ; ‘ don’t speak that way. We have made a terrible blunder of our lives. I want to do as you would wish me to do—walk straight and faithfully through the future as it is made for us, different though it is from what we expected it to be. But the blunder will not be mended by

trying to deceive ourselves. I cannot pretend to be grateful. I never shall be. I curse the day you went away. I curse the day you returned to find me separated from you. It was a blunder. I will do my best to bear the consequences honestly. But let there be no shamming about it. I love you, Ruth, now as ever. I always will love you, and you only.'

'Stephen, Stephen,' she cried, holding up her hands and trying to stop him, 'this is madness.'

'I know it,' he answered, with bitter calmness, 'it is madness, and who knows where it may end? But, oh, Ruth, it would be greater madness to pretend that I do not love you, with all my heart and soul. No woman can ever hold your place in my life.'

A robin, which had been hopping from twig to twig round the Ring, halting occasionally to vent some louder note than usual of its plaintive winter song, suddenly flew away as if

something behind the hedge had frightened it. The light, cold breeze carried with it a sob which had not come from Ruth or Stephen.

They were both very pale, and again silent, after his outburst of passionate truth. She knew and felt that it was truth—felt it in herself, although she restrained the words which would have expressed the same fact that he had proclaimed on his side——

‘And no man can hold your place in my life!’

That was the cry which rang in her brain, but she did not give it voice. What had been in her eyes a noble self-sacrifice was transformed into a crime, under the glare of his fiery words.

What was the ghastly crime they had committed? They had murdered Love; and he did not know yet how much greater her guilt was than his. She stood appalled at it now. When he came to know he would curse her

perhaps as he had cursed the day of their separation.

She almost wished that he would do it at once, so that in his contempt for her folly he might cease to care for her. Ay, it would have been well for them if she had not left the ship.

With pale, trembling lips she spoke :


‘I have done wrong, Stephen—wrong in going away, wrong in coming back. Forgive me.’

‘Forgive me,’ he answered, ‘if you can. Had I been faithful as you have been, we would not be in this horrible position now.’

His self-accusation tortured her.

‘You are not to blame—you could not know that I had escaped.’

‘You said that you would come back in a year ; I should have waited. I should have had faith in your pledge and waited, no matter what proof was given to me that you were lost.



You have kept your word; you have come back and you find me false.'


'No, no, Stephen, not that——'

'What else can we call it? Shall I try to excuse myself and tell you that, believing you dead, I did not care what happened? That is true. I was told that it was in my power to make one who had been a generous, devoted friend happy. I was glad to be of some use and and so it came about . . . : God help us, Ruth—I cannot help myself Poor Dahlia!'

That exclamation gave Ruth strength, and helped her to see what was to be done.

'For her sake you must try—we must both try—to think as little of the past as we can. We must part now and—it is so hard to say it, Stephen!'

She almost broke down there, notwithstanding the firm hold she was striving to keep on her emotion.



‘Say what?’


‘That we must not meet again; at any rate, not until years have enabled us to think calmly of our blunder; not until we are able to clasp hands with the feeling that we are true friends.’

‘Then this is our last meeting,’ he said, ‘for that time can never come to me.’

‘I believe it will come to us both,’ she went on, earnestly; and with an effort to smile through her tears: ‘Who knows yet whether a blunder has been made after all? The real blunder is that I am alive, and I do not suppose that you will say that you are sorry I escaped from the wreck.’

‘You have not escaped it—you are in the midst of the real wreck now,’ he replied. ‘I doubt if either of us will see land again.’

‘We can do our best, and if we are to sink let it be whilst trying our best to reach a safe haven.’



She spoke bravely, and his eyes were fixed upon her with tender admiration. He drew her arm within his own, holding her hand.

‘I have said as much already; I mean to do my best to keep from sinking, but I know that there is no land for me. My duty will be done, I hope. There will be comfort in knowing that you are alive—comfort in striving to please you although we are parted.’

‘In that way you will help me, too.’

‘Then there will be comfort in thinking that should trouble beset me you can still counsel me, and that in time of need I can see you.’

‘Do not speak of that.’

‘No, not at present. But I am so bewildered by all that has happened, I have not yet asked you how it was that the news of your loss travelled so fast and the news of your safety so slowly.’

‘I cannot explain; but it was no doubt

partly due to the speed with which ill news always travels. Partly because we were so long detained in the bush before we arrived at a place from which we could send the good news.'


'Tell me about it,' he said, looking into her face with sad yearning eyes.

'You have heard what Smith had to tell you, and there is little to add. The exploring party we were fortunate enough to come upon made every arrangement for us.'

'What became of your wounded companion?'

There was some hesitation in her manner, but it was so brief that he did not observe it.

'He was carried to a shepherd's shanty on the nearest sheep run. There we remained until our friends returned from their exploration. By that time he had recovered, and we accompanied them to Sydney. After seeing my uncle I took passage for England.'



‘I suppose you left your friend Harrison at the Antipodes?’

‘No, he came home, too. But I must tell you of all these things at another time, Stephen; I am not able to do it to-day.’

‘Then we are to meet again,’ he cried joyfully, and forgetting that he had ever heard the name of Harrison or had ever felt any curiosity regarding him.

‘I do not think we should,’ was the answer, and there was a weary look of sorrow on her calm, white face, which instantly recalled to his mind the cruel position in which they now stood.

‘When did you arrive?’

His voice was husky and his head bowed, for the parting was near. He, too, felt that they ought not to meet again at present.

‘Only this morning. I did not mean to stir out of doors, and certainly not to see you until you had been prepared to see me. Per-

haps it is as well that we have been taken by surprise—it is well that it is over. Now we must say good-bye.’

‘Not yet—I have so much to say—so much to hear, Ruth.’

‘I cannot speak any more,’ she answered, and the strength which had enabled her to maintain a calm bearing throughout was fast giving way.

‘I cannot leave you yet. I will walk as far as the house.’

‘No, let us part here. Good-bye, Stephen.’

She spoke resolutely, and yet the voice was tremulous, and the eyes were full of tears. She knew that in a few minutes more she would break down altogether.

‘I cannot speak the word,’ he answered, distractedly. ‘You forced it from me once—I cannot speak it again.’ Then, seeing the piteous look which answered his reproach, he added hastily, ‘Forgive me, Ruth, I am not

master of my thoughts or tongue. I did hold up stoutly after you went away, for I knew that you would come back, and you would find me faithful. Then came the news of your death—confirmed on every hand—and my despair made me indifferent to everything. It was no matter to me whether I married or not; and if I did it was little matter who should be my wife. You return; you find me false and I am doubly so, for in my love for you I am false to her. Why was no sign made to me before it was too late!’

Too weak to resist, too strong to submit to his love, the pain of the struggle in the man’s heart was intensified by the consciousness of honest purpose in all that he had done.

‘Not false or faithless *yet*, Stephen, and the future is still under your control.’

There was a beauty in her sad, white face as she spoke the earnest words in a low, firm voice that made him pause.

‘You are right,’ he said, striving hard to subdue his agitation; ‘the future is still under our control. There, we’ll do the best we can with it. I will be calmer next time we meet; calmer and stronger the time after that; and so it will go on, until by-and-by I may be able to take your hand without feeling the bitterness of my loss. I do not say good-bye, only good-day, for I expect to see you to-morrow. We must not shun our danger, but face it boldly, and so overcome it.’

Brave words; but they are not wise who fight unnecessary battles.

They clasped hands and parted. She going back to Kemerton alone, he standing in the Holly Bush Ring with eyes fixed upon the ground until he knew that when he raised them he would not see her and be tempted to follow.

Then he sat down on the fallen tree, and fancy endowed it with sympathetic symbolism;

the tempest had torn it from its place and cast it on the ground ; yet even in that position it was not altogether useless. He, too, had been torn by the tempest from his proper place, but he might be useful ; he could be true.

Poor Dahlia ! How was he to hide from her what was so deeply impressed on his own mind, that happiness could never be his apart from Ruth. Resignation to duty is a sorry substitute for love.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

PURGATORY.

HE did not return to the Grange until late that afternoon.

Dahlia, from a window, saw him approaching. She had been watching for hours. She noted that his steps were short and quick, that his head was bowed on his breast. She did not go down to meet him.


Her eyes were swollen and the lids inflamed; but she had not been crying. It would have been well if that safety-valve of the emotions had been opened for her. She was very pale and restless.

How many years had she been waiting in that room for him to come back? She did not

know, but it seemed to her that they would number a long lifetime; that she had grown old and haggard in face, and shrivelled in person, whilst waiting, although measured by the clock only a few hours had passed since she had played that little bit of farce with him this morning to carry out her practical joke! Yet she had grown very old and ugly in the interval—so ugly! She felt it in herself and there was the mirror confirming it!

How could she expect him to care for her? He must despise such a poor frivolous creature. She had some vague sense that the ugliness which oppressed her so cruelly was in her thought and not her person.

She had been waiting—frenzied with jealousy and full of dire imaginings at one moment; humble, trembling, and ashamed at another—resolved to speak frankly to him; to show him that she could even sympathise with him for his misfortune in having married one he could




not care for, and to tell him how hard she would try to soothe the pain of his regret by reminding him as little as possible of her existence. She would follow in his steps, like Burd Helen in the ballad, his devoted slave, grateful for any kind look or smile that might be cast to her. . . . She would be a pythoness, and tear them both to pieces!

These strange fits of changing passion exhausted and bewildered her, but one thought predominated: she wanted to see him back and speak to him.

Now he had come, and she did not go to him.

She had seen them kiss; she had heard fragments of their conversation; she had not waited for the close of the interview; she had been too much afraid that the impulse to spring out upon them would prove too strong for her, and she had run away.

She had heard that one terrible phrase,—



She spoke bravely, and his eyes were fixed upon her with tender admiration. He drew her arm within his own, holding her hand.

‘I have said as much already; I mean to do my best to keep from sinking, but I know that there is no land for me. My duty will be done, I hope. There will be comfort in knowing that you are alive—comfort in striving to please you although we are parted.’

‘In that way you will help me, too.’

‘Then there will be comfort in thinking that should trouble beset me you can still counsel me, and that in time of need I can see you.’

‘Do not speak of that.’

‘No, not at present. But I am so bewildered by all that has happened, I have not yet asked you how it was that the news of your loss travelled so fast and the news of your safety so slowly.’

‘I cannot explain; but it was no doubt

partly due to the speed with which ill news always travels. Partly because we were so long detained in the bush before we arrived at a place from which we could send the good news.'

'Tell me about it,' he said, looking into her face with sad yearning eyes.

'You have heard what Smith had to tell you, and there is little to add. The exploring party we were fortunate enough to come upon made every arrangement for us.'

'What became of your wounded companion?'

There was some hesitation in her manner, but it was so brief that he did not observe it.

'He was carried to a shepherd's shanty on the nearest sheep run. There we remained until our friends returned from their exploration. By that time he had recovered, and we accompanied them to Sydney. After seeing my uncle I took passage for England.'

imagined it would be: then like a child she trembled, hid her face on his breast, and sobbed.


‘Oh, Stephen, I did not mean to do any harm.’

‘I am sure of that—I am sure of that,’ he answered, comfortingly. ‘It is an unhappy position for us all; we must do what we can to prevent it being made any worse.’

He had worked out the problem of how he was to act, and the solution proved to be a simple enough one in theory when stated plainly; but he could not shut his eyes to the fact that it might be difficult for them all to act their parts faithfully. This was the solution:

He was to be kinder than ever to Dahlia, more tolerant of her faults, more watchful over his own, and in that way make up as far as it was in the power of man for the love he could never give her.

Ruth should be as his sister: he would not



avoid meeting her, although he would not seek her. Dahlia and she should be friends, as they had been before—but closer and dearer friends—and in their friendship bury all thought of rivalry. That was the course he had sketched out for their future, and he believed they could traverse it steadily; for Ruth was strong and noble; Dahlia was affectionate and generous, as she had shown in so many ways by her interest in his affairs when there had seemed no probability that she could ever be his wife. For himself, he believed that his desire to be worthy of the esteem of Ruth would enable him to do his part.

At any rate he could see no other way by which they could have the least hope of amending the miserable blunder which had been made.

Therefore he had come to Dahlia, not to chide her for the trick played upon him—a much more dangerous trick on her own ac-

‘I suppose you left your friend Harrison at the Antipodes?’

‘No, he came home, too. But I must tell you of all these things at another time, Stephen; I am not able to do it to-day.’

‘Then we are to meet again,’ he cried joyfully, and forgetting that he had ever heard the name of Harrison or had ever felt any curiosity regarding him.

‘I do not think we should,’ was the answer, and there was a weary look of sorrow on her calm, white face, which instantly recalled to his mind the cruel position in which they now stood.

‘When did you arrive?’

His voice was husky and his head bowed, for the parting was near. He, too, felt that they ought not to meet again at present.

‘Only this morning. I did not mean to stir out of doors, and certainly not to see you until you had been prepared to see me. Per-

haps it is as well that we have been taken by surprise—it is well that it is over. Now we must say good-bye.’

‘Not yet—I have so much to say—so much to hear, Ruth.’

‘I cannot speak any more,’ she answered, and the strength which had enabled her to maintain a calm bearing throughout was fast giving way.

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‘Only this morning. I did not mean to stir out of doors, and certainly not to see you until you had been prepared to see me. Per-

haps it is as well that we have been taken by surprise—it is well that it is over. Now we must say good-bye.’

‘Not yet—I have so much to say—so much to hear, Ruth.’


‘I cannot speak any more,’ she answered, and the strength which had enabled her to maintain a calm bearing throughout was fast giving way.

‘I cannot leave you yet. I will walk as far as the house.’

‘No, let us part here. Good-bye, Stephen.’

She spoke resolutely, and yet the voice was tremulous, and the eyes were full of tears. She knew that in a few minutes more she would break down altogether.

‘I cannot speak the word,’ he answered, distractedly. ‘You forced it from me once—I cannot speak it again.’ Then, seeing the piteous look which answered his reproach, he added hastily, ‘Forgive me, Ruth, I am not




to her own room to rest and recover from the agitation caused by the interview with Stephen, but she had to pass the door of the study, and the message Brassey had delivered being still in her ears, she paused.

A moment's reflection : a quick resolve—she would go to him at once. He should see for himself what she had to suffer in returning to Kemerton.

Mr. Dottridge was standing on the hearth-rug before a cheery fire, reading a letter. He was not the same man who had occupied that room little more than a year ago. Although the complexion was still sallow, and the cheeks somewhat hollow, the long intellectual features gave no special indication of ill-health. His eyes were bright and no longer required the protection of a shade.

As she entered he turned with a pleasant smile, but when her veil was raised the smile changed to an expression of anxiety.



‘Ruth — what has happened?’ he exclaimed. The voice was a kindly one, with a note of sadness in it as he added, ‘You need not answer. You have seen him. . . . I did not think you were in such haste.’

She did not heed the reproach. Pallid, and her heart so frozen that the genial atmosphere of the room could not thaw it, she stood for a brief space looking at him, trying to regain command of her tongue, so that her words might be uttered distinctly.

‘It was an accident,’ she said at length, in a low voice, as she handed him Dahlia’s letter.

He examined it curiously, and seemed relieved at sight of the penmanship. When he had read it, the smile began to appear on his face again.

‘You have seen them both, then? It was a very sensible and clever arrangement of hers to have the meeting at once, and get the awk-

wardness rubbed off quickly. I did not give her credit for so much wit. Come, sit down and tell me all that occurred. I see the meeting has distressed you, whatever they may have felt.'

'You are mistaken,' she rejoined, advancing nearer to him ; but she did not sit down ; 'I did not see her—only him.'

He looked at the letter, and then at her.

'Was it a trick of his?'

'No, he was not even aware that we had arrived. He believed, as I do, that it was a piece of thoughtless kindness on her part to give us an agreeable surprise. It was unfortunate.'

There was silence.

She was again thinking how strange it was that the reasons which a year ago appeared to her so strong and complete for her leaving England should now appear to have been so utterly insufficient as to place her in the position

of one who had committed a great and irremediable crime against three persons—Stephen Meredith, Dahlia Whitcombe, and herself.


True, accident had marred all her calculations. Had Stephen married, knowing her to be alive, she would then only have had to carry out the plan with which she had started, and congratulate herself upon having been able by her own self-sacrifice to advance his fortunes so materially. But there were the wreck and the report of her death ; her return and the declaration from his own lips that in spite of their altered position his love was the same as ever. That meant ruin to his life, misery to herself and to others, unless she could find some way of helping him to overcome what was now worse than folly—worse than absolute madness.

Had it not been for the wreck she would have returned and found him waiting—she was sure of that now, if she had ever doubted it—

and then no matter what poverty they might have had to encounter, she would have hesitated no longer to cost him the loss of the fortune promised by his cousin. She would have devoted all her life to him. But the accident of the wreck had altered all that.

If she had only heard of the marriage before she left Australia she would never have returned to England, notwithstanding the appeals of Mr. Dottridge and her desire to be kind to him after all he had hazarded and done on her account. Indeed that might have served as another reason for her staying at the Antipodes, although it was scarcely worth counting, as she was conscious that he would most probably have said, 'Very well—I shall stay, too.'


No tidings of the event awaited her, however, when she reached Sydney nine months after sailing from Greenhithe. There was one letter from Stephen—written shortly after her



departure—full of tender thoughts, high hopes, and earnest longing for the period of banishment to pass. There was another from Rapier, written later, in his gayest and airiest style, telling her amongst other trifles that the wooing sped merrily, and that she must return before the year was out if she did not wish to be too late to prevent the match, which he was confident would be made.

There were no letters for her after these. She expected a telegram from Stephen upon hearing Harry Smith's message, and there was none. She proposed to telegraph the good news of her safety, and Mr. Dottridge said,

‘Very well ; but this is scarcely holding to the spirit of our compact. If you are to make the trial a complete one, as I bargained it should be, you ought to do no more than you have already done. Unless your messenger Smith has been very unfortunate he ought to be in England now, and Meredith ought to have had a message waiting for you.’



‘And there would have been had Smith arrived.’

‘Do as you will ; but if I could prevent you sending the message, I would.’

Then she had hesitated for a little, not liking to cause him any pain that might be spared ; but in this instance there was no help for it.

‘It would be cruel, as well as unjust, to keep them in suspense. I must send the message. Had you been at home what would you have said of me if I had not taken the first opportunity of letting you know of my safety?’

‘Very unpleasant things, no doubt. That suggests a way to overcome my chief objection. I do not want you to be communicating directly with Stephen, and in the natural order of things, had I been at home, you would have sent the message to me, as your guardian, to spread the news—because, you know, even the richest people don’t send different telegrams

where one will serve when they have to pay half-a-guinea a word for them. Now, you are not supposed to be aware of my absence from home. So, address the telegram to me at Kemerton; that will serve your purpose as well as if you sent it direct, and gratify me.'

'But then it will not be opened.'


'Of course it will. Rapier has charge of all letters and telegrams at Kemerton—Bassnett attends to the rest.'

'I do not like Mr. Rapier. I should much prefer that he had nothing to do with my affairs.'

'But in this case it is my affairs he is attending to. Surely you will not permit that prejudice to stand in the way of pleasing me.'

So the telegram was addressed to Humphrey Dottridge, but neither Stephen nor Bassnett had yet heard anything about it.

A reply was received from Rapier expressing in his own and Mr. Dottridge's name great



joy at the good news, and hoping that her friends might speedily have the happiness of welcoming her home. Nothing was said about Stephen and Dahlia, for the reason that the sender desired Ruth to return to England, and was satisfied that she would not do so if assured that his prophecy had been fulfilled. It was not until they reached London that the fact of the marriage was made known to her, and Stephen's cry—'Why was no sign made to me before it was too late?'—found an echo in her brain. Why was it that he had not heard that she lived?

Could it be that Mr. Dottridge had for his own purposes persuaded her to send the message to Kemerton so that he might be able to keep the news from Stephen until it was too late?

She did not like the suspicion, and tried to put it away from her; but it would not be put away. The ugly question kept constantly run-


ning through all these other thoughts as she stood there before the cheery fire, feeling so cold and miserable.

He was thinking as he watched her face earnestly :

‘ Is this only the effect of temporary weakness, or is this love for him so strong that she cannot overcome it ? ’

And he marvelled that the woman who had displayed the mental vigour of a strong man—aye, and the physical endurance of one, too, when the occasion demanded it—should display so much infirmity because an event had happened which she had been in many ways prepared to expect, and to which she at one time professed herself willing to submit patiently if it should happen.

But then she had in her heart believed that it was impossible, and the circumstances which had brought about this event were of such a nature that her faith in Stephen was as unshaken as his love for her was unchanged.



‘It will depend on yourself, Ruth,’ said Mr. Dottridge, gently, ‘whether or not this unexpected meeting was unfortunate. You have one satisfaction in it, that you would both speak without premeditation, and any angry words on either side will readily be forgiven on reflection.’


‘We did not speak in anger. It would have been better if we had.’

‘Then what has distressed you so much? What was the result?’

He spoke with timid eagerness. She regarded him with cold, firm eyes.

‘The result has been to confirm me in what I said to you long ago—that your plan was a cruel and a wicked one for us all.’

‘I am sorry that you think so still. Selfish it was, as I owned at the first, but nothing more, as the result has proved, unless you choose to make it so.’



‘The result is due to falsehood on the part of some one.’


‘Falsehood?’

‘Why was it that Stephen heard nothing of the message from Sydney?’

‘Heard nothing of the message!’ he ejaculated, amazed; then he frowned, and his expression became stern as her own. ‘I understand your suspicion—it is natural. For the moment I can only answer that I do not know. But Rapier will be here to-night, and from him I shall demand a full explanation. The date of the marriage, however, may show that the arrival of the telegram could have been of no consequence. The instructions it conveyed, however, were that all friends were to be informed of your safety.’

There was no doubting his sincerity; he, at any rate, was innocent of any jugglery in the matter of the telegram.

‘Forgive me,’ she said, agitatedly; ‘I should




not have come to you at present, but I wished you to judge for yourself whether or not you can hope for any good to come of it if you insist upon keeping me to my promise to stay here three months. I do not know what to do ; I do not know what ought to be done !’

‘You must sit down and try to calm yourself, Ruth,’ he said, with all his usual gentleness in addressing her, ‘and I will try to show you what may be done to mend whatever mistakes have been made by me—by you, or by others.’

CHAPTER XXXV.

WHAT MAY BE DONE.

THERE are occasions in every life when things appear very bad on the surface, provocative of much anxiety and distress, but still apparently conquerable by earnest endeavour, whilst at the same time there is a strong under-current of vague feeling—not thought—that here is something on which depends the good or ill-fortune of the future, and which we ourselves are yet powerless to direct with certainty aright. It is the same feeling as that experienced by one in a boat at sea ; in storm and darkness, steering as he believes towards land and safety, and yet conscious that he may be driving fast towards destruction. We



never are conscious of the real crises of our lives until they are past, and the happy or unhappy inspiration of the moment has won success or disaster.

So with Humphrey Dottridge, the man who had been so old in worldly success and physical and mental pain, and who was so young in hope and renewed health. So with Ruth Clark, the woman who had been so wise in her love and self-sacrifice, and who was, in the miscarriage of her plans, so like a helpless child in the midst of a heap of cherished but broken toys. They knew that they had much trouble to encounter, and what was visible they could deal with ; but there was the vague feeling which neither could shape into words that much more depended on the course they should at present adopt than they were able at the moment to divine.

In this extremity they could only follow the good old rule which has directed so many

others to haven or to quicksand—accept what they saw and ‘make the best of it.’ This was how Mr. Dottridge began :

‘I do not believe any man was ever able to give perfectly impartial advice in a matter which affected his own dearest interests. At any rate I will not pretend even to think that I am doing so, although I believe that your happiness, Ruth, holds the first place in all my considerations. Of course, at the same time, I believe, because I wish to believe, that your happiness lies with me. So, we will start with this clear understanding, that I am an honestly selfish adviser.’

Ruth was looking vacantly at the wall, and scarcely seemed to hear him. She answered, however, by repeating the bitter question.’

‘What ought to be done?’

‘You must prove to him that with this marriage the nature of your regard for him

changed completely. There is nothing else you require to do.'

'No—nothing else. But how can I do that?'

She spoke in a dull, mechanical way, her eyes still fixed on the wall.

'By accepting the position in a common-sense way, as Dahlia is doing. I am puzzled to make out how she came to be aware of your coming; it seems she was here late last night. But this little pleasantry, as she evidently considers it, of bringing you and her husband together at once, and this letter which I received about an hour ago, show that she has perfect confidence in the good sense of both of you. I have no doubt that you, at any rate, will satisfy her that the confidence is not misplaced.'

She turned her eyes slowly to his face with the expression of one who whilst thinking of something else has heard the sound of words

without catching their purport, and is wondering what it may be.

‘I said that I would try to show you what may be done,’ he went on, ‘and we have settled that my advice cannot escape the suspicion of selfishness. Let it be so. You referred to your promise to stay here for three months—do you wish after being here only a few hours to withdraw it?’

‘It will be best.’

‘I think not; but I will not insist upon it if you still resolve to leave Kemerton after you have had a night to reflect on what you are doing. Can you not see what your immediate flight will mean to Stephen and to—his wife?’

‘What?’

‘I do not like to say it, Ruth—the thought of it is hard enough for me to bear. But your flight will mean that, in spite of the altered position of affairs, you still care too much for him to see him happy with another woman.’

Her cheeks flushed, and the light of intelligence gleamed in her eyes again. She spoke firmly :

‘ You cannot think that ; you know that I wish them both to be happy—that I would do anything in my power to make them so.’

‘ You can prove it if you will.’

‘ After what he has said his feelings still are for me,—I prove my desire for their happiness best by never crossing their path again. He will forget me when I am away.’

‘ Very likely ; but if you make it appear that you take flight because they have destroyed your happiness you supply reason enough to embitter his life and Dahlia’s—perhaps even for him to follow you.’

‘ Follow me ?’

‘ Yes—such things have happened, and may in this case, unless you act firmly now. And yet, no, he cannot be so mad.’

Mr. Dottridge did not complete that sen-

tence as he had intended, for as it was formed in his mind it was ungenerous to the man who was no longer his rival. 'He cannot be so mad as to throw aside everything for you, because he does not care for you as I do.' That was the original sentence.

'What would you wish me to do?' inquired Ruth, thoughtfully. She was saying to herself, 'Whatever is most disagreeable to myself is most likely to be the right thing to do for others.'

'I would wish you to continue here for a few weeks, and longer if we find it serves our purpose. Say nothing as to whether your stay is to be permanent or not, but let us go on as formerly, as if nothing unusual had occurred. We can see the Merediths or not see them, as you feel disposed, and my known eccentricities will account for anything odd you may have to do in declining invitations. You will remember and I will remember that Dottridge is still an

invalid, although Harrison may be well enough: Can you do this ?'


'I will try.'

'And you will succeed, for you will be true to yourself, and that is all I want. You will see that your calm presence will do more to help him to remember his duty and to make us all happy than the foolish flight you proposed could have done.'

'If I could be sure of that !' she exclaimed, and the brave spirit which shone in her eyes proclaimed the woman's conquest of her own emotions.

'I am sure of it, and you soon will be. At the worst we can go away should it be found necessary. I say "we" because as your guardian I am bound to take care of you. Now go and rest.'

That was the only direct suggestion he had made to his interest in proving what he wished to prove, that the nature of her regard for Stephen had changed.




CHAPTER XXXVI.

MR. RAPIER'S CONFIDANT.

MR. RAPIER was popularly supposed to be a man who wore his heart upon his sleeve. He was so genial with everybody, so pleasant in his conversation, so ready to render those trifling services to strangers in train, omnibus, or steamer, which make enforced companionship agreeable, that he picked up acquaintances everywhere.

He was a favourite at the Cosmos, and he made it a rule to be in the club some part of every day; when in town he might be said to live at the club. At luncheon time he had obtained a kind of prescriptive right to a seat at the table in the bay-window looking down



St. James's Street. He was known to almost every member, familiar with many, and yet if anybody had been asked who and what he was the answer would have been :

‘ Can’t say. He’s a first-rate hand at whist, and plays billiards like Cook and Roberts. Must have private means, but fancy he has something to do with some foreign Government. He’s a capital fellow.’


Beyond this vague idea of Lewis Rapier’s position nothing was known except that he had been proposed to the club by a general and seconded by a well-known physician who was one of the committee.

But the question had been very rarely asked formerly, and was never asked now. There he was, a prominent part of the club, taking much interest in new members, and helping to make them feel at home in as short a space as possible. Thus there were numbers who called him their friend, and never thought of inquir-

ing into his private affairs. His age was another unquestioned mystery : everyone supposed he was about thirty, and knew that he must be forty-five at least—although he might have been seventy if judged by events to which he was able to refer as from personal experience. He openly professed to enjoy the fun of this mystery about his age, and would playfully call himself ‘the old man of the sea.’

Although he had many friends and acquaintances Mr. Rapier had only one Confidant ; but to that one he trusted his inmost thoughts and consulted him about every act of his life. He found that Confidant in the mirror of whatever room he happened to occupy, but they held closest council in his chambers in Duke Street.

There they were face to face at this moment ; he holding a small packet of letters in his hand whilst he looked enquiringly at his other self.




He was speaking very slowly, as if desirous of impressing every word upon the understanding of his interlocutor.

‘I have come up expressly to find these letters. I return by an early train and place them in her hands. They are all that I can find, and as one of them would certainly be disagreeable reading for Mr. Meredith she will perhaps believe me. Whether or not, it is all I can do to satisfy her; and it is enough to make her trust me, seeing that the success of my project will suit herself better than anything else could do. She will stick to her bargain, and play her part without prompting. Helping me for her own interest she will give me something of my old place of importance in her thoughts.’

He paused to consider. He smiled hopefully, and his Confidant smiled. He tapped the packet with his finger, and went on.

‘The money is settled absolutely on herself.



Dottridge has no power to recall it. Well? Let us take everything into account; do not let us blink anything. Miss Ruth knows nothing of her little fortune, and I dare say if we make a match of it he will increase the amount in remembrance of my services.'

He turned the packet over in his hand until he saw the Confidant nodding approvingly, as if saying, 'Go on, you are doing fairly well.'

'We are not to shirk anything, mind you; we are to look at the worst as well as the best side of our prospects. The best general always spends more thought on the points where he may be beaten than on those where victory is most probable.

'Miss Ruth may prove obstinate, and, in spite of the faithlessness of her swain, prefer single cursedness to a union with even such an eligible partner as you, my friend. Well? What should happen then?'

His expression became serious, and for a

moment his brows contracted, as if he were looking at an enemy in fence and trying to make out what his next move might be. The countenance cleared again.

‘In that case, Stephen Meredith might find an opportunity provided for him to take a second wife. . . . Disagreeable? Certainly, and no one would lament the necessity should it arise more than you would, my friend. But we cannot have everything perfectly smooth in this world, and we can only hope for the best. . . . Yes, she shall have the letters, and I think Miss Ruth will not be so cruel as to drive her from her home.’

He put the letters in his pocket and looked at his watch.

‘It is almost train time. There is only one thing more we have to settle. What does Dottridge mean by this mysterious trip to Australia? Seems to have done him good, too, in spite of the wreck. . . . Bassnett

knows nothing. Could it be only as a forlorn hope of recovering health, and taking advantage of her going at the same time, so that he might be sure of a careful nurse on the voyage? But why then make such a profound secret of it? . . . It can't be that he is in love with her himself?'

Mr. Rapier laughed outright at the absurdity of this idea.

'Well, then, even if he is, it would only be a question whether to help him forward on his journey to the village churchyard and wait to marry his widow. By Jove, that would be excellent!'

Much amused by this droll speculation, Mr. Rapier took leave of his confidant, and made his way to the Liverpool Street station to take train back for Dunthorpe.



CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE OTHER SIDE.

STEPHEN went away after Dahlia had given that promise to write at once, and he did not understand at the time the meaning of the smile and the little hysterical laugh with which the words were spoken. When one desires to do right and has a fixed idea of how it is to be done, it is most difficult to comprehend that another person may see quite a different way of doing it, and may misapprehend the motives which have directed the choice of your method. This result of conscientious conviction is often stigmatised as 'pig-headedness.'

But 'pig-headedness' or not, the motive which actuated him was pure and brave and

noble. Love, the Angel directing thought and action to their highest purposes, could never become to him Love the Fiend leading, through the perfumed paths of base selfish indulgence, to misery. His love taught him to desire to make Dahlia happy, even for Ruth's sake. He believed that he should attain that end most directly by proving to her that his duty would make him faithful to her because his love was pure, and he wished to be worthy of it. The result he could not and did not speculate upon because that depended on Dahlia herself, and he trusted her to be inspired by his own spirit—not to cry for what was unattainable, but to accept the inevitable and conform to its conditions.

‘Poor fool,’ the wise observer will exclaim, ‘to think that human nature is not more subject to its passions than to its discretion!’

The wise observer is right. What a pity it

is we can never be so wise about our own affairs as about those of other people.

What woman will accept duty in the place of love ! How many submit to the neglect of all duty so long as there is a pretence of love. Dahlia was one of the many. She could have borne anything more easily than the knowledge that he cared more for another than for her—ill-temper, indifference, drunkenness even, rather than that.

She resented being treated like a child whose feelings could be satisfied with soft words and promises of sweetmeats, whilst she was placed outside the real life of the man.

When she gave that promise to write at once to Ruth she had no definite idea of what she would write ; but there was a vague fancy in her mind of doing something vicious that would make Ruth, and Stephen too, suffer anguish akin to her own.

She had been impressed by his sorrow ;

astonished and relieved by the almost entire absence of reproach ; and a spirit of gentleness had taken possession of her. She would be good and kind to him ; she would make up for all he had lost—or fancied he had lost—if a woman's devotion could do it. He should never hear an upbraiding word from her. She would watch his humours and tune her own moods to harmony with them. She would be so faithful to all his wishes that he should himself acknowledge by-and-by that he had found in her his true helpmate.

And then at the first trial of these wise resolves they were swept away by the jealous passion of the mere woman.

All preceding circumstances were forgotten. She hated Ruth ; she hated Stephen. We hate most where we love most.

She could not see the necessity there was to hold her own place now by making large allowance for the unhappy position in which he

felt himself to be in regard to Ruth, and by waiting patiently until the first pain and awkwardness of realising it had passed. She did not, of course, say so to herself in as many words, but her emotions were stirred by the unfortunate theory that there ought to be no pain or awkwardness ; that she was as good as Ruth and that she had the right to demand his first consideration. As it was he showed no consideration for her, or he would be eager to keep Ruth far away, knowing that her presence would be a constant reminder that she, Dahlia, was his wife only in name.

With that vicious feeling upon her she arranged her dress with special care. She would write, as she had said, at once. She would see what Ruth would do now ; and then — ?

She did not know what then ; and there came a feeling of great loneliness as she dimly realised that she was turning away from the

only human creature in whom her better nature could find rest and strength.

She had never known what friendship was. Gay, flippanant, free of speech and manner, she knew many people with whom she might talk and amuse herself. But that species of cunning which maintains a petty secretiveness under an exterior of guilelessness prevented her from having confidence in anybody in the whole world except Stephen. There was Mrs. Meredith, of course, and there were the girls ; but she could not trust any of them. She listened to all their little secrets and grievances, gave sympathy and fairly good counsel, but she gave nothing more. There was only Stephen, and now she had lost confidence in him.

When that sense of utter loneliness creeps upon one who is surrounded by seeming prosperity, it is more terrible to bear and to think of than when misfortune gives some excuse for the desertion of friends.

But it was Ruth who was taking him away. Ruth was her enemy; had she not returned they would have been happy. And she knew that quite well; she knew that she ought never to have returned to Kemerton to destroy the peace of Derewood Grange.

‘What am I to do?’ was her helpless cry; and then she grew angry with Stephen again.

There would have been no need to ask that question if he had not made the declaration in the Green Lane, which placed an eternal barrier between him and his wife.

She went down to the boudoir and took a seat at her pretty little writing-table. Everything on it and about it was pretty. There was not a spot of ink on the silver inkstand, not a speck of dust on any of the numerous dainty ornaments which were tastefully ranged on the table, like fairy guards on the richly mounted coromandel desk. Her fancy for rich

perfumes was evident here too, and the whole arrangements appeared to be those which were appropriate only to the composition of the most tender billet-doux.

She took the finest note paper and began her epistle.

‘My Dearest——’

Yes. She would say ‘My Dearest Ruth.’ The irony could not be misunderstood if the woman had any of the ordinary feelings of womanhood, and at any rate she enjoyed it herself.

‘My Dearest Ruth,—You must have been greatly amazed, and angry perhaps, at first to find that——’

What nonsense it was to say that she was angry because she met Stephen instead of her ! There was no irony in that—only silliness at which Ruth could smile as she read.

Dahlia tore up the sheet and began anew. She wrote only a few lines in the same strain,

and again tore up the paper. She could not satisfy herself. She wanted to write such a note as, read by Stephen, would appear to his trusting nature a very kindly and generous one, whilst read by Ruth every word should sting with its satire and reproach.

She tore up several sheets of paper. She bit the end of the pen as she stared at another blank sheet; then she rose impatiently and went to the window. Against the dull sky of the cold afternoon the bare branches of the trees outside appeared to form a huge spider's web in which she was caught, and there seemed to be no hope of escape.

A servant came to light the lamps, and at the same time brought a letter.

‘When did this come?’ enquired Dahlia, recognising with some surprise the handwriting of Mr. Dottridge.

‘Only this minute, ma’am, and the man is waiting for an answer. And if you please,

ma'am, Mr. Rapier has come back and asks if you can see him.'

Rapier!—was he to be always at her elbow when her evil passions were in the ascendant? She had hoped he would not return that day, for she had understood that he was going to Kemerton. Now?—she was not sure whether she was pleased or sorry that he had returned. He, of course, would answer that question, 'What am I to do?' if she were to ask him.

She preserved her self-possession as she bade the servant wait.

Mr. Dottridge's note was brief, but it was all written by his own hand—a fact which puzzled as well as amazed her.

'My dear Dahlia,—I would like you and Stephen to come over to see me to-morrow. There will be luncheon at half-past one, and we can have a little chat afterwards.

'Yours truly,

'H. DOTTRIDGE.'



Mr. Dottridge was proud of never having subscribed himself anything but 'Yours truly,' because it was a commonplace which everybody understood meant nothing.

Dahlia wrote a few lines accepting the invitation, and then she wrote to Ruth; but the epistle was quite different from what she had intended it to be. All she said was :

'I intended to write you an explanation of what occurred to-day; but as I shall see you to-morrow it can be done more satisfactorily in conversation.'

This, with the usual preliminary address and conclusion, was what her much meditated letter came to at last.

'Give these to the man,' she said, handing the two notes to the servant, 'and tell Mr. Rapier I am at liberty to see him.'

Although she could not at a moment's notice hide the traces of the agitation she had

been suffering that afternoon, she was able to shade the lamps so that her face was in shadow. Her voice and manner were now under complete control.

Rapier entered in his quiet way, and the door closed behind him.

‘I am sorry to bother you, Mrs. Meredith,’ he said, placing the packet of letters on the table, ‘but I was anxious to satisfy you as quickly as possible that I was in earnest about these things.’

He pointed to the packet, and in her impulsive way she snatched it up at once, showing her eagerness to possess it, and the importance she attached to it in spite of her determination to be as cool and deliberate as Rapier himself. She was instantly conscious of the weakness thus indicated, and tried to pass it off with an affected laugh, but seeing him smile she cast aside her affectation and said frankly, if somewhat petulantly :

‘I am glad to have them. Thank you. Are they all here?’

‘All that I possess to the best of my knowledge. I have spent the whole forenoon in searching the few places where anything of yours might have been preserved, and this is all I can discover. Should more turn up at any time they will be delivered to you at once. You can trust me in this since it is my interest to do everything in my power to please you. That is the guarantee for my good faith.’

She scanned his face closely. She fancied that she was only searching for some indication of his innermost thoughts; but she was also revealing to him the craving of her distracted mind for some one to help her.

‘On that guarantee I can and do trust you,’ she said, satisfied.

He bowed.

‘Self-interest is always the surest ground for trust. Keeping that principle in mind, will

you permit me to tell you what I saw in your face?’

‘Do not waste compliments upon me. Reserve them, if they are of any use, for *her*.’

‘I mean to reserve them, for I shall require all the sweet phrases my vocabulary can be compounded into for her ear. But I thought it was understood that you and I have nothing to do with compliments now.’

‘I was afraid you had forgotten.’

‘You need not fear that. The position is too critical for both of us to allow any waste of words. What I see, then, is that a great change has taken place in you since we spoke together in this room last night.’

‘No doubt—I have been thinking.’

‘Yes, and you have been discovering and doing. I am not gifted with the power of clairvoyance, but I see, as clearly as if I were, that you have had proofs of the impossibility of there being happiness between you and your

husband so long as Ruth Clark is a free woman.'

'I have,' she muttered, bitterly, turning away from him to hide the fierce tears of chagrin which started to her eyes in spite of every effort to restrain them.

'I do not wish you to give me any explanation beyond what you may think it desirable to give for your own sake. But it would be of service to us both if you could tell me that I am right in surmising that they have already met.'

She nodded. She had been using a handkerchief to wipe her eyes; now she was unconsciously wringing it as if it were some reptile she wanted to kill.

'I thought so, and you have seen them. Well, I am pleased, for that should convince you of the necessity there is for prompt action on your part and mine. It should also enable you to do something which, I believe, will help

me to help you, although I am not, at this moment, prepared to tell you exactly how, because I do not yet know myself.'

'Tell me what it is.'

There was no doubting the tone in which that was said: the something would be very vile indeed if she would not do it.


'It is such a trifle that you may fancy it is only a jest of mine.'

'I do not think that even you would jest with me in my present state. We have no time for sport.'

'That is the case precisely; we are both too much in earnest, and have too much at stake, to find any time for amusement. But we must act quietly. You have promised me your help, and I believe you can give it very effectively by a very simple act.'

'Tell me what it is?' she repeated impatiently.

'I have given you these letters back.'



went on undisturbed by her irritability ; ‘and now I want you to write another to me.’

‘To you?’

‘Yes, but it is only a line, and one which may be shown to anybody. I am known to be an old friend of yours, and to have had something to do with the arrangements for your settlement in life. There is nothing more natural under these circumstances than that being in trouble you should tell me so and seek my advice, as you cannot have your guardian’s.’

‘He has invited me to Kemerton to-morrow.’

‘Ah! . . .’ Rapier reflected for a moment. Then : ‘That may be all the better, and your note will enable me to get at the meaning of some things which at present are not clear to me. Will you give it?’

She searched his face again, anxious to fathom his design ; but he was able to meet her gaze quite frankly ; for he had explained his

design truly, and if he had not told her how he was to carry it into effect it was for the reason given, namely, he did not yet know himself.

She went back slowly to the pretty writing-table and took up the pen. With her elbow on the desk she rested her aching brow on the disengaged hand as she spoke :

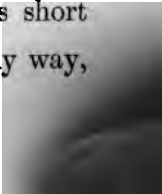
‘ I will write what you wish me to say.’

‘ It would be best to come from yourself,’ he replied, observing her curiously:

This was the docility of despair, and she was evidently ready to outstrip him in anything he might attempt, with the object of taking Ruth away so that her influence over Stephen’s mind might cease.

‘ Dictate,’ she answered mechanically : ‘ I am not able to think.’

‘ As you will. We must make it as short as possible. Begin in the usual friendly way, “ Dear Mr. Rapier.” ’



‘Dear Mr. Rapier,’ she echoed, as she traced the words; but there was not the least expression in the echo.

‘Then I think the rest should be to this effect—“I am in great distress,” full stop.

‘. . . . *distress*, full stop.’

“Although Mr. Dottridge has come home again, I am not at liberty to seek his advice, and I am constrained”—No, don’t put that in: it is too forced. Say—“but I must have some impartial person to advise me. Can you do it? You are aware of the great influence Ruth Clark had over my husband before she went away from Kemerton. You cannot understand with what pain I write that now she is here again her influence is as great as ever —.”’

‘How do you know that?’ she cried sharply, and looking round fiercely.

After a brief pause he answered gravely:

‘Your manner of asking the question proves

that it is so. If I am wrong—if you do not believe that her influence is as great as ever, do not write it.'

The flush which had overspread her face faded, leaving it pale. She grew sick as she heard that cruel declaration in the Green Lane repeated—

'No woman can ever hold your place in my life!'

Stifling a sob, she pressed her brow with her hand again, and wrote the words Rapier had dictated.

'Ready? . . Then you should add—"We were so happy together; and now I can only see misery for us all. I don't know what to do. Can you—can anyone help me?"—Now, if you sign your full name, Dahlia Meredith, I think that letter will enable me to do you the greatest service you can desire, and serve myself at the same time.'

She folded the paper, and gave it



without enquiring in what manner he purposed using it.

‘When shall I hear from you?’ was all she asked.

‘As soon as there is anything to report—to-morrow night probably; the day following, certainly. Take courage; I think I see my way to accomplish all we desire.’

‘I hope so. I will thank you—afterwards.’

She took no note of his going. With arms crossed on the desk and head bowed upon them, she remained a long time. It was nearly the dinner hour when she rose—calm now and with dry eyes, but feeling very faint.

She went into the dining-room. The table was laid, but there was no one present yet. She opened the sideboard; poured some liquid resembling pale sherry into a glass, and having mixed it with water drank it.

Her eyes brightened ; her cheeks flushed she was stronger now. She looked defiantly around, and if Ruth had been there she would have mocked her, and triumphed over her. She would be weak no longer ; there should be no pitiful cries for help—for love. She would stand upon her rights. She had brought fortune and ease to him and his family. They owed her gratitude and respect ; and she would have both. They were hers by right.

Ruth and Stephen should soon find that they had no silly child to play with ; but a strong, determined woman, capable of defending herself if he failed to defend her.

Poor Dahlia ! She had found the false, insidious comforter—the implacable and always victorious foe of happiness.

.
Accustomed as they were to Dahlia's whimsical moods, Mrs. Meredith senior, and the girls, were much surprised by her excited and curious

manner that evening. Stephen was distressed by it, attributing it—rightly enough to a certain extent—to her thoughts about Ruth.

She spoke of her jestingly as the shipwrecked heroine of the *Eucalyptus*, and throwing Mr. Dottridge's note to him, she said :

‘ I did not think it necessary to ask whether or not you would accept the invitation. I took it for granted that you would, as you would see our dear friend again ; and I have written to tell her when we meet we can have a chat about things in general, and that will of course include your request that she should favour us with a visit. That will be a treat for us all—only you must take care, Stephen, that she does not frighten us too much with the harrowing details of her adventures.’

‘ I should imagine that on her own account she will not like to dwell upon the subject,’ he said, quietly ; ‘ and I am sure she will never be able to regard it as one to jest about.’

‘Oh, but there will be no jesting. We will all put on our Sunday faces; and if it would please you we can manage to produce a few tears on the occasion. I should have thought, however, that we had had enough of tears, and that we ought to be merry, not melancholy, when our dearest friend has had a narrow escape from drowning.’

He tried to change the subject of conversation, but Dahlia perversely returned to it again and again.

After dinner the mother found an opportunity of speaking to her alone.

‘What is the matter with you to-night, Dahlia,’ she enquired anxiously. ‘You are not like yourself. Are you not happy?’

‘Happy!—how could I be otherwise? Did I not smile enough and laugh enough to prove how happy I am? Why, Stephen thought I was too happy!’

‘Now, child, you are worrying your poor

head about Ruth. You must not do that. You might have had reason to do it—and I would have done it, too—if she had come back before the wedding. But as she didn't you have no cause to worrit.'

'No—no cause at all; and I am quite happy!'


CHAPTER XXXVIII.

FORBIDDEN GROUND.

WHEN Rapier arrived at Kemerton he was shown at once to Mr. Dottridge's room. They had many subjects to discuss, but the first question asked was in reference to Ruth's telegram from Sydney.

'I understand,' said Mr. Dottridge, who had resumed some of the outward signs of being still an invalid, and his eyes were shaded. 'I understand that the telegram requested that the news should be communicated to all friends. How was it that Meredith heard nothing about it?'

'I suppose it is Miss Clark who is anxious on that point?' answered Rapier, smiling.



wondering within himself more and more why Dottridge should keep up with him the farce of pretending to have met Ruth again only after her return to England.

‘Yes, but I also wish to understand it. Did the message arrive before the marriage?’

‘It did, but only a few days. It could not have stopped the proceedings, and it certainly would have caused a great deal of vexation to everybody here. Taking that into account, and especially considering that you had been particularly anxious to bring about this match, I took upon myself the responsibility of saying nothing about the telegram. I thought, and still think, that I was doing the best that could be done for everybody under the circumstances. I trust you agree with me.’

‘Not altogether. I was desirous that they should be brought to see the advantages of their union. I did not mean to force them into it—only to offer them inducements.’

‘Well, that is all you have done ; but you evidently attach more importance to the telegram than I did. You cannot imagine that they would have stopped the wedding after the banns had been read and all the arrangements completed ?’

‘Miss Clark thinks it is possible that he would have drawn back.’

‘Then she has a poorer opinion of Meredith than I have. She must have spoken without reflection when she said that. I am sure she is too good-natured to wish you or me to have caused the pain which the announcement of her safety would have produced at that time. They were melancholy enough as it was, but they were contented, and it would have been brutal to have interfered with them.’

‘You must explain the course adopted to Miss Clark herself.’

‘Certainly. Can I see her at once? I undertake to satisfy her.’

‘At any rate, I hope you will be able to satisfy her that the blame does not rest with me.’

‘That is easily done. Of course she is aware that you have been away all the time.’

This was said carelessly, as if it were probable that Dottridge had not yet explained to Ruth how matters stood during her absence.

‘She knows everything. . . . Are you positive that the news of her safety would not have stopped the marriage?’

‘Quite positive. Apart from the fact that he likes Dahlia, Meredith would have been a bankrupt but for her fortune, and your generosity, which I reckon as part of her fortune.’

‘You don’t mean to say that he would have allowed the consideration of the money to have any influence on his decision?’

Rapier noted the subdued eagerness with

which that was spoken, and the wish that he should answer 'yes.'

'Did you ever hear of any man—and especially one in straits—whose decision would not be influenced by a fortune?'

'There may be such men,' said Dottridge, meditatively.

Mr. Rapier mentally observed :

'He *is* in love, and is fancying that he could be indifferent to fortune on her account ! Whew !'

He said aloud—

'There are such men in fiction, but nowhere else.'

Dottridge did not appear to have observed the comment, as he enquired dreamily :

'Are they happy?'

Rapier shrugged his shoulders, and made a slight motion with his hands, as if he were putting something away from him.

'They were jogging along excellently, and

would have turned out a model couple ; but this resurrection of Miss Clark has upset everything. I daresay they will be all right again as soon as they have got over the first shock of jealousy on her part, and disappointment on his. I saw her this afternoon, and she is badly cut up. I have only once seen a woman look so utterly dejected and weary of life, and that was her mother when you sent me——’

‘Stop!’ ejaculated Dottridge, sternly, and his voice was so strong that Rapier was amazed. ‘That subject is forbidden, now more than ever.’

‘Pardon, it was a momentary slip—the resemblance was so striking.’

‘You can see Miss Clark now,’ said Mr. Dottridge coldly. ‘When you return you can give me your report of all that has been going on in my absence.’

‘I shall be with you again in half an hour.’

Rapier was satisfied on two points : that his chief had thoughts of matrimony, and that the memory of Dahlia's mother could still be made to sting him.

He had no doubt whatever that he would prosper in his own designs.



CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE STATE OF THE CASE.

MR. RAPIER went into the drawing-room quite cheerfully. He held in his possession—thanks to his own genius of forethought—the means of satisfying Ruth that he had acted wisely and even generously in keeping silent about her telegram. More, he could prove that it would only have wrought mischief had he made its contents known at the time of its arrival.

Brassey came to him with this message—

‘Miss Clark’s compliments, and will you be kind enough to excuse her, as she is engaged at present.’

‘Very well. Say to Miss Clark that I will wait her pleasure here, as it is important that I

should see her before returning to Mr. Dottridge.'

'Yes, sir.'

Brassey proceeded willingly to obey him, for, like all the servants of Kemerton and elsewhere, he not only respected Mr. Rapier but liked him.

'He is such a free outspoken gentleman, and has such pleasant ways,' was the old butler's opinion. 'Not to reckon that the master knows the right sort when he sees them; and he ain't like to have him for his right-hand man if he weren't the right sort.'

There were several large mirrors in the room: two reaching from wainscot to cornice, and one covering a large space above the fireplace. Thus Rapier had ample opportunity for consulting his Confidant. Resting his arm on the mantelpiece, he regarded his most intimate friend with inquisitive eyes.

He noted that the look of cheerfulness with

which he had entered the room gradually changed to one of serious reflection. There was nothing gloomy about it, however ; only that serious expression the countenance of a strong man assumes when he faces some unexpected difficulty which yet does not frighten him or appear to be insurmountable.

‘It is awkward—decidedly awkward,’ he observed, ‘and wildly absurd as it appeared at first, it promises to cause a good deal of trouble now that I know it is a fact. What do you say?’

Then Sir Confidant made answer :

‘I say that there is nothing absurd about it if you take everything into consideration.’

‘Certainly, we are at a point where we must take everything into account.’

‘Well, then, you know from what he managed to go through on that trip to Australia he must be a toughish fellow, and that he has cheated the doctors completely, although

he wants you and others to think he is still in a poor condition.'

'That's one point. Then his age?'

'You know that he is scarcely eight years older than yourself, and you don't fancy yourself an aged person. He has been kind to her—he has been her companion in peril, and above all he was her champion; got knocked on the head for her sake, and she nursed him back to life. She can't help being fond of him more or less.'

'We generally do give most attention to the most troublesome persons and things; but that is not to say we like them best,' commented Mr. Rapier.

'Perhaps not best,' continued the shadow, with emphasis, 'but next best will do when the best is out of reach. Moreover, he has secured her gratitude, and she is one who will do a good deal for the person who has done that; for, as you know, she has rather extravagant

notions about self-sacrifice. It is quite in her to become his wife for no other reason than that he has earned her gratitude and requires a nurse !’

‘ Ah ! . . . if I could only do something to prove to her that she owes him no gratitude at all.’

‘ Yes—if you could do that,’ echoed the Confidant.

‘ It is possible,’ said Mr. Rapier, slowly ; ‘ but then the question is shall I gain most by acting as his lieutenant in this as in other things, or by becoming his rival ?’

The Confidant looked doubtful ; and he continued in the same slow way :

‘ Of course, if I first oppose him he cuts off supplies, and might possibly score my name out of that will Bassnett has in his safe. To set against that I have only the chance of winning her and that nice little property about which she knows nothing yet. Of course that is

only a chance, and Dottridge is a certainty. Why, then, should I hesitate between the two?'

He took a turn across the floor, glancing at his friend in the mirrors as he passed. He halted and made this admission :

'There is something in herself which tempts me to the hazard. That's the fact. What is it? Surely not the infirmity called love? Nonsense—greater nonsense even than it would be in him. Is it the mere vanity of conquering such a woman? . . . Tut—am I a mere gambler who does not stop to seek the reason why he risks his whole fortune on the colour of a card?'

A pause. Then, smiling at his own weakness :

'I am afraid it is the gambler's spirit which has got into me; but it does not master me yet. No, my friend, we hold several trump cards, and unless they are badly played indeed

we must win by tricks if not by honours. What do you say if I win her with his consent—which I expected to do until I made the discovery of his confounded folly? What do you say to that?’

‘It would be good sport, and worthy of you.’

‘Then I think it may be done, but we shall know better after a little chat with her. Now, what have I to stake against her gratitude and his wealth?’

‘You have your knowledge of the past, and your power of translating other people’s words and actions into something quite different from what they mean.’

‘Just so.’

‘And you have the advantage of him in person; for you may say of yourself “not absolutely handsome, but demnibly genteel,” as your friend Carrill said of himself when he thought nobody heard him.’

Mr. Rapier was nearly caught like his friend, for just then the door opened and Ruth entered.

The sight of her pale face at once altered the tone of the greeting he had purposed giving her. He had intended to be blithe, and to convey to her with quiet earnestness the great joy he felt at her safe return. Instead of that he advanced to meet her with an expression of profound anxiety.


‘My dear Miss Clark, the happiness I feel in seeing you again is a little damped by the fear that you have not yet recovered from the effects of your terrible trials. I do hope, however, that you will soon be quite strong.’

She bowed coldly.

‘Thank you, Mr. Rapier. I was told that Mr. Dottridge desired you to see me?’

He was still holding the hand he had taken at his first greeting, and she quietly but resolutely withdrew it.

‘I desired to see you on my own account.’



He wishes to be exonerated from any blame for the delay which occurred in telling your friend Stephen Meredith that you had been rescued.'

He had resumed his ordinary outward bearing—cool, suave, and obliging—but there was just the indication of a sneering smile playing about his lips which suggested that there was not much respect for his chief lying behind the words.

'I regret that he troubled you in regard to a matter which is now of no consequence,' she said, a little nervously, for his peculiar smile recalled that disagreeable suspicion which had for a moment troubled her when she first enquired about the telegram.

Rapier kept his eyes fixed steadily upon her, and she could not help feeling that there was a kind of pity for her simplicity in his expression and tone as he spoke deliberately :

'You may, if you please, acquit him of any


share in the transaction. I take the whole blame. But my action was dictated by what it seemed to me you would have wished me to do had you known that your message only reached me on the day fixed for the wedding, when Meredith was content with his fate, and Dahlia—poor girl—was so happy. The marriage could not have been broken off without disgrace and misery to him and to her. I do not believe you would have wished *that*.

‘No, it was better to be silent,’ she said, turning her face away. ‘But why did you not tell me what had happened?’

‘Frankly, for the reason that I wanted you to come back; I *knew* that Dottridge wanted you to come back as much as he wanted the marriage to be hurried over.’

‘He did not tell you to suppress the message?’ she exclaimed with a flush as of coming indignation.

‘No, he did not tell me—in words. But



that was unnecessary : the instructions left with me were perfectly explicit.'

'His instructions?'

'Yes; even had it been my wish to act otherwise—and you are aware that it could not be—I was not at liberty to do so.'

'You do not mean that Mr. Dottridge directed you to deceive me—or them?'

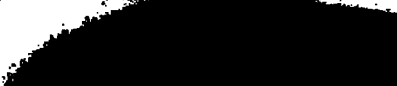
'You may put what construction you please on my words. I am simply telling you what I was expected to do; and you can understand it, for you are acquainted with the conditions on which Dahlia received her money, and Meredith was released from the heavy mortgages on Derewood.'

This was as hard a hit as he intended it to be; for she could not help remembering that the conditions had been framed expressly on her account—because Dottridge loved her. True she had protested against them; but she submitted. And for what?

It needed all the strength of memory to enable her to realise that she had been moved by a spirit of self-sacrifice in that weary past as much as by the desire to feel in after years that she had not been the cause of Stephen's loss of fortune. Had events progressed in the ordinary course of experience her submission would have been justified.

How mean it all appeared to be now. Yet it had not failed in the object she had had in view. Stephen had obtained the fortune, and he would be happy by-and-by. She must keep a firm hold of that fact. She must keep it constantly before her eyes; it would steady her. She must go forward now; she must not think of going back, because she could not if she would. The chief successes and failures of life are based on no higher principle.

'We need not continue this painful subject, Mr. Rapier,' she said, with a calmness which



surprised him. 'I am satisfied that Mr. Dottridge did not intend any deception to be practised; I am satisfied that you acted as you thought for the best. If you please, we will not refer to it again.'

'I certainly have no desire to do so.'

'Thank you—we must forget, if we can. We cannot mend matters by talking of them.'

'But we may prevent matters from becoming worse.'

He said this so quietly, and yet with such peculiar emphasis, that she was as much startled as if he had whispered 'murder' in her ear.

'Why do you speak so strangely? We are at the end of a long lane of blunders and unhappiness—matters cannot be worse.'

'Pardon me, we are not at the turning point yet. Matters may be made much worse than they are; and if they are the blame will be yours.'

‘Mine!’ she cried, pained and astounded by the declaration.


‘Yours, undoubtedly; for it is in your power now to set matters right, and if you refuse to use it the blame of what may happen will be yours.’

‘What *can* happen to bring blame on any one?’

‘Shame—crime, perhaps, who knows? But the power to avert it is in your hands. Will you use it whilst it remains to you—for you can possess it but for a few days—it may be only for a few hours?’

His earnestness startled her even more than his wild words and vague forebodings. Yet he was speaking so softly that had anyone entered suddenly he might have continued in the same tone, and the tragic import of his words would not have been suspected.

‘You must explain,’ she said, making an effort to shake off the unpleasant influence of



his speech and manner. 'What power I may possess to help others I am ready to use whenever it may be required.'

'I am sure of it,' he exclaimed, in the proud tone of one who finds his high estimate of another fully confirmed; 'and I am sure that you will use it whatever pain it may cost you.'

'You have not yet explained,' she answered anxiously, but somewhat more calmly.

'You cannot hide from yourself, Miss Clark, what your return means to the people of Derewood—distraction and misery so long as—you are as you are.'

Was Rapier pleading for Dottridge? This was so similar to what he had said. Or were the consequences of her being alive so palpable to everyone that the two men at once fell upon the same argument to persuade her to their will?


She had encountered the perils of ship-

wreck calmly. She had borne with fortitude all the trials and privations which succeeded, and it seemed horrible after passing through so much to find herself here the miserable stumbling block of everyone. Aye, Stephen had said truly, the real shipwreck was here amongst the green lanes and fields of Kemerton.

The very horror of the position steadied her nerves.

‘The consequences need not be so terrible,’ she said, coldly.

‘They are already terrible,’ he replied, with a shade of reproachful sternness in his tone, and she winced under it in spite of her consciousness that the man was working upon her for his own ends, whatever they might be. ‘They are already terrible,’ he repeated. ‘Meredith is utterly upset, as anyone would expect who had the least knowledge of his character, and knew anything of what his feelings were for you. Dablis is a passionate,



weak, and foolish creature—I know her well. She, poor thing, lives in him, and I may, to his credit, tell you that it was owing to a mad attempt she made upon her own life that the marriage was arranged with what was, in my eyes, very unbecoming haste. They were happy; she was beginning to believe that he was learning to care for her as every man should for the woman to whom he has pledged himself. You come, and all is changed. She sees that he can never care for her now, and is miserable—indeed, I think almost, if not quite, mad. What it may end in, Heaven alone knows.’

‘She is not so weak or foolish as you think,’ murmured Ruth, in much agitation.

‘Read this, and judge for yourself.’

He handed her the letter which Dahlia had written to his dictation.

She read, and every word quickened her pain. Then there came upon her, like a fresh

breeze on the hot face of one who has been long in a stifling atmosphere, the sense of her own sincerity of purpose and of her faith in Stephen's loyalty.

She refolded the letter, and with a sad smile gave it back to him.

'I think you exaggerate the importance of this letter. At any rate she will soon learn that whatever fears she may have of my crossing her happiness are baseless. Till then we can do nothing.'

'You can do everything. With one word you can give back happiness to her and peace of mind to Meredith.'


'How?'

'Say that you will become my wife.'

There was silence in the room.

She knew, and he knew, that these words had sounded a crisis in their fates.

Although she had been aware of his ulterior object, he had brought about the



cunningly that, for the moment, she was staggered and made dumb by his audacity. He had already had evidence of her disapproval of his intentions. She had been perfectly plain with him on that score ; but apparently he was one of those who are believed to be the most successful of wooers—those who will not take ‘no’ for answer. At this juncture it was not only disapproval she experienced, but repugnance.

She spoke with complete self-control now.

‘You have already had my answer on that subject, Mr. Rapier ; and there has been no change in my sentiments since we last spoke of it. Good evening.’

‘Stay!’

The word was pronounced in such a tone of authority that she involuntarily obeyed.

‘I want you to consider well what you are doing,’ he said firmly, and with an apparent undercurrent of emotion. ‘I am aware of what I stake in persisting in this pursuit of you.’

I should not persist but that I believe there is a future of happiness for us together. I do not want you to decide now. But you must decide and answer by to-morrow night.'

'My decision is already given. Nothing can alter it.'

There was a cold tone of resolution in her voice which would have satisfied anyone but a man like Rapier that it was useless to argue further.

'I will not take that answer now. I wait until to-morrow night. I do not wish you to fancy that I threaten; but if your answer is still "no"—then I trust your conscience may be liberal enough to forgive you for the shame and misery you will bring on Stephen Meredith and the inevitable ruin to her.'

Ruth was very pale, but she was not moved from her resolution.

'I cannot believe, Mr. Rapier, that such responsibilities as you suggest can be thrust



upon a woman because she refuses to accept a man whom she does not care for, and cannot respect when he seeks to win her by threats.'

'You will think of what I have said,' he replied, with cool significance.

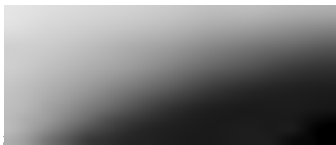
'I imagine it will not be easy to forget it; but I shall try; and whether I think of it or not my decision will be the same. If I thought that my refusal caused you pain, I would express my regret; but feeling convinced that it does not, I can only express the hope that on the few occasions when we may have to meet again, there will be no further reference to this unpleasant subject. I thank you most heartily for the information you have given me about my friends—thank you because it directs me how to help them, although not precisely in the way you propose. Good evening and good bye, Mr. Rapier.'

She gave him her hand; he took it with the same quiet politeness which he might have

displayed had he been parting with her after the most commonplace conversation.

‘I shall wait until nine o’clock to-morrow evening,’ he said, calmly, as he opened the door for her and bowed her out.

Brave and cool as she was now, she could not quite escape the mesmeric influence of that determined iteration of the supremacy of his will.



CHAPTER XL.

LOVE LIES BLEEDING.

STEPHEN was late in his room that night.

He had gone there immediately after dinner—vexed, amazed, and bewildered by Dahlia's conduct. He was haunted by a vague suspicion which in its definite form assumed such a horrible shape that he shrank from the bare thought of it. He would not—he could not believe it possible, for that would involve a calamity worse than anything he had yet had to encounter—the worst that any man can have to face and deal with. He was miserable enough as it was : this would finish him.

Dick Smalley came with the information that a small packet which had arrived at the

railway station that afternoon had been delivered only a few minutes ago. It was from Smith and Co., agents at Sydney for Dottridge and Co., London.

‘I know nothing about it, Dick, but bring it here, and we will see what it is. Very likely it is some surprise my cousin has ordered for my wife, as he could not be present at the marriage.’

The packet was brought into the library.

‘It ain’t a big one, sir, to come so far,’ said Smalley, speculatively, as he laid it on the table, ‘and it ain’t heavy enough to be a nugget of gold.’

Stephen hastily opened the packet and found in it an ordinary-looking note-book.

It was Ruth’s.

There was nothing at all about the outside of the book to suggest what was within; yet the moment he opened it and saw her handwriting he paused, instinctively checked by the

fear that there was something about to come to his knowledge which was to influence the course of his life. Why that should be he could not divine, and he did not stay to try. The pause he made was that which everybody involuntarily makes when suddenly brought to the junction of two roads, one of which he knows will lead him right, the other, maybe, far out of his way.


The outer address was simply that of some clerk in the Sydney office, but there was the superscription in Ruth's writing that the book was intended for his eyes only. Then arose the question whether he should look at it or not without first obtaining her sanction, as she was so near, and considering all that had happened since these pages were written.

This thing came to him as from the Dead ; yet from the hand of one who had still a living representative with full authority to speak and act for the one who had passed away. The

Ruth who had written these pages, whatever their purport might be, was the Ruth who had hoped to return to him and find him faithful. She was indeed dead to him : he must believe her to be so or he could not hope for happiness.

Then should he take advantage of the opportunity so strangely offered him to secure the confidence of the dead Ruth which the living Ruth might wish to withhold from him ?

But she had told him that there were things which she could not explain before going away, and which she would explain when she returned. He had a right to know these things ; he had a right to know why she had resisted all his appeals and left him when he so much needed her love to sustain him in the struggle he had to make. She had left him under circumstances which demanded all his faith in her to believe that she could care for him at all. She had declared that she had good reasons for acting as she was doing.



He had a right to know these reasons, and so, for good or ill, he opened the book again and read.

First his cheeks tingled with mad joy as he found out how Ruth loved him—how she had sacrificed her own heart for his sake. Then they became white with rage and shame as he discovered the mean motives which must have actuated Dahlia. By the light of this terrible revelation he interpreted all her conduct towards him so differently from what it had appeared to be at the time. Her sympathy had been a sham—her devotion a mockery, which could not have deceived any but the most contemptible fool.

And he was that most contemptible of all fools—the one who permits himself to be deceived by his own vanity.

He stopped there and tried to calm himself.

Was it vanity which prompted the suggestion that it was impossible that Dahlia could

have been moved only by her anxiety to secure the promised fortune? She had been a good friend to him. She had proved herself a faithful and careful wife. . . . She must have cared for him apart from the fortune. . . . In any case he must believe she did.

Then he read on. He lived through all the events on board the *Eucalyptus*, now glowing with tender sympathy for Ruth; and again wild with anguish and rage as the action of his cousin Dottridge became more and more clear to him.

The revelation was almost more than he could bear. Why had Ruth doubted him? How could she have thought for an instant that all the wealth of Golconda could ever have compensated him for the loss of her!

She had not known him rightly, and she had been deceived . . . They had both been deceived . . . by Dottridge and by Dahlia.

He closed the book and rose, pallid and

bewildered. He paced the room fiercely, and as the blood quickened in his veins his teeth became clenched.

Scorn them—hate them! All the scorn and hate which he could give to them were nothing to the loathing with which he regarded himself.

‘This is the generous cousin—the friend of the family—my benefactor!’ he cried in bitterness and agony of heart. ‘He has *paid* me for my happiness—*paid* me for the woman who was life and fortune to me. And I have accepted the bribe! . . . Oh, my God, what a wretched thing I am!’

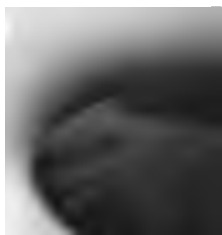
And in his self-contempt this stalwart, heartbroken man sat down on a chair, and hiding his face on crossed arms sobbed in the bitterness of shame and humiliation.

The weakness was brief, but it made the look of passion with which he lifted his head the more terrible.

The door opened, and Dahlia, in her night-dress, entered. Her eyes were unnaturally bright, although her cheeks were pale. She tottered as she advanced to him.

‘Stephen, I have been waiting for you ; it is so late, and I am sorry that I vexed you. And——’

And then she caught sight of his face. With a cry of terror she fell unconscious at his feet.



CHAPTER XLI.

THROUGH THE NIGHT.

DAHLIA had come to him intending to ask his forgiveness, but the shock of seeing her as she was, combined with the discoveries he had just made to snap the last cord of self-control, and his features were for a time distorted by wild passion, hate, and loathing.

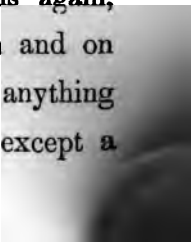
To the woman it was like the uncovering of the veiled prophet of Khorassan; the face in which she had expected to find the light of mercy was hideous in its malignant wrath. Conscience-stricken, too, at her own vindictive thoughts, she knew that he had discovered everything, and was overwhelmed by her shame and fear.

Whatever wrathful words he might have spoken were stifled, and the sight of her lying prostrate at his feet recalled some of his self-possession.

Frowning, he carried her to their chamber, and placed her on the bed. Then he made what use he could of smelling salts and cold water in the endeavour to restore consciousness. She sighed and muttered some disconnected words; she opened her eyes with a stupid stare for an instant, and closed them again. She was like one who, having been half-awakened, relapsed into heavy sleep.

Stephen gazed at her with an expression in which there was now more of pitying amazement than of rage or scorn.


He did think of the possibility of her having been meddling with Jim's chemicals again, and he looked hastily round the room and on the floor; but there were no signs of anything which could account for her stupor except a



tumbler which he found on the dressing-table. Having examined that, he drew the curtains of the bed, and went downstairs again.

For a time he sat with his face hidden in his hands—the meanness of the position oppressed him now more than its horror. The incident had the effect of diverting his thoughts from the first impulse of his passion, which had been to ride to Kemerton that night, to confront Dottridge, to renounce his gifts, and to heap scorn upon him for his treachery. The time which passed in his attendance upon Dahlia enabled him to become sensible of the folly of this course.

But in the morning he would see him—he would force his way to him if necessary. If he found him still in the feeble condition which had formerly rendered the slightest disturbance dangerous; and if reproach and contumely could stir any emotion in his breast strong enough to kill!—then, he would kill him.



His indignation visited Ruth, too, for it was her doubt of him which had been the main-spring of the irreparable mischief that had been wrought. She talked of her suffering—her sacrifice—what could they signify but that she had believed he esteemed money more than——

Ugh! he could not bring himself to link the two things together even in the momentary cry of his own distracted brain. How base, how contemptible must have been her thoughts of him! In this wild turmoil of thought and emotion he seemed to live through a long life of bitterness, and yet it was not morning. Looking impatiently at his watch he found that it was only half-past two, and felt that it was impossible to sit still throughout the weary hours which must pass before he could take any action.

But when the morning came, when they stood face to face——what then? The ques-

tion pulled him up sharply ; for every answer he could find to it only revealed his own impotence the more clearly.

He went out.


A strong west wind was making a sound among the trees as of the roaring of a great sea ; heavy black clouds were sweeping rapidly along overhead, and so frequently obscuring the moon that its occasional radiance only made the intervals of darkness more dark. It was a gusty angry night, or rather morning, and the atmosphere was of that intensely cold moist character which is the most unpleasant of all weathers. It was certainly not the kind of night which one would choose for a walk of pleasure.

But it suited with the man's humour ; and setting his face to the wind he marched forward as if he were walking for a wager. He was not at first aware that he was going in the direction of Kemerton.

Yes—when they stood face to face, what then? Was he to play the part of a Billingsgate fishwoman, and spend his futile wrath in cursing him?

Dottridge could afford to ridicule such folly. And he would deserve to be laughed at if he were to perpetrate it. He could fling back his gift of the mortgages; but what a farce that would be!—he could not pay them off. There was the bitterness of his position. Yet he was not altogether helpless; he could and he would sell every inch of Derewood and all that was on it. He would compel Dahlia to restore the money that had been her portion. Luckily he had not touched it: he had left every farthing under her own control. She had married him to possess it: she could keep him now by forfeiting it, or lose him by refusing to do so.

He would be a beggar, but he would be free from that man whose treachery cancelled



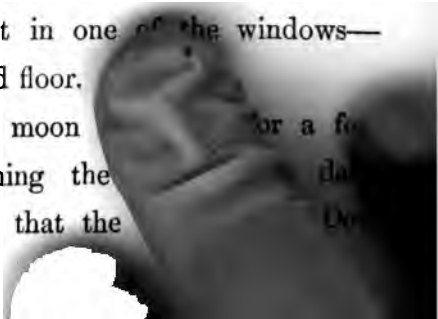
every claim to gratitude. Hate and scorn were the only earnings of his false favour.

And when all was done, the cruel question came again, what then? What better would he be? His lost freedom could not be restored—the happy love which would have been his but for this accursed man's accursed wealth. Youth and hope were alike destroyed; these were riches no wealth could buy.

He was tearing through the Green Lane, still at the mad pace with which he had started, and found himself on the lawn at Kemerton before he was aware of his whereabouts.

But, when he looked up, there was no astonishment in his mind until he saw that there was a light in one of the windows—one on the ground floor.

Then, as the moon for a few minutes, brightening the day, shone on the building, he saw that the



tridge's room. The mad thoughts which had been surging in his brain suggested mad action.

He knew the eccentric ways of the master of Kemerton, and he knew that one of them was a fondness for the night. He liked to be alone in his room in the silent hours when everybody else was fast asleep. What deep schemes he incubated during those hours, what financial triumphs he planned, could only be surmised from the enormous wealth and influence he possessed.

Why not satisfy his heart, and crush all this in an instant by one clutch of strong sinewy fingers round his throat?

It could be done.

Here was the opportunity he needed—the opportunity to wreak dire vengeance on the wretch who, under the mask of kindness, had slowly poisoning his life.

He advanced to the window. Through

the division of the curtains he saw a figure kneeling before the large safe which he knew stood in the corner farthest from the window, and contained his cousin's most precious documents.

He knew that, because Dottridge had said to him more than once,

‘Should I die, and leave anything in doubt, search that safe, and you will find an explanation of it. You can open it by this master-key, which I carry always attached to my watch.’

And he had shown him the simple-looking gold key, the barrel lined with steel, which opened every lock in Kemerton.

The figure was very slow and careful in its movements; it seemed to be picking out particular packets from a number of them in the lower part of the safe. Presently it stopped; held a packet up to the light, and laying it on the table, bent eagerly over the drawer again as if seeking for more.

Now was the moment to burst in upon him and settle accounts.

He did not note the curious circumstance that the shutters were not closed ; and, even if he had noted it, he would have paid no heed to it, as the ways of Dottridge were so peculiar.

It did strike him as odd, however, that when he touched the latch of the window he found it yield to him—noiselessly, of course, for every hinge and latch in the house was daily carefully oiled on account of the master's nerves. And the rule had been carried out even during his long absence.

He did not know exactly what it was he was going to do, but he felt the nervous gathering of his strength which the tiger must experience when about to spring upon its prey. He opened the window, thrust aside the curtains, and with one bound crossed the room, grasping his victim by the throat so that he could not utter a sound.

It was all so swift, so silent, that murder might have been done and no trace left of its perpetrator.

But when he turned the ghastly face towards him to speak his spite, he found that it was Rapier he had in his grasp, not Dottridge.

Instantly he released him, and Rapier, rising from his knees as he rubbed his throat, exclaimed indignantly, yet in a cautious voice—

‘What in the devil’s name brings you here at this time of night trying to throttle people?’

Stephen looked and felt confused. He glanced from Rapier’s astounded and angry face to the packet on the table which had been taken from the safe. He observed mechanically that it was neatly folded and docketed ‘Dottridge—Whitcombe,’ with a date which he did not make out.

‘I mistook you for someone else,’ he muttered, awkwardly.

‘Oh, our friend Dottridge,’ said Rapier,

smoothing his ruffled collar ; ‘ you don’t mean to say that you keep prowling about the house at night waiting for a chance to settle him. My opinion is that you would have done it if you had given him the same grip you gave me just now.’

‘ I have something to speak to him about ; but I have not yet decided that I shall be his executioner.’

‘ I felt as if you meant to be mine, at any rate. But explain, Meredith, what’s up ? ’

He began deliberately to rearrange the papers in the safe.

Stephen recovered himself. He knew this man to be in the confidence of his cousin, and he knew that circumstances frequently required them to be at work at all sorts of odd hours. Still, there was something in Rapier’s manner associated somehow with the names on that packet lying there on the table which made him suspicious.

He fired a random shot, and his words were pronounced with a cutting coolness as if they had been frozen as he passed through the outer atmosphere.

‘I, too, might say, Rapier, what’s up that you are here at this hour dealing with the private papers of my cousin?’

He laid his hand on the packet he had specially noted.

Rapier looked at him with an expression of amused curiosity.

‘Upon my soul, Meredith, you are a rum customer. Here you come breaking into a gentleman’s house like a burglar at all sorts of hours in the morning, and then you take to scolding the people who happen to be awake, because they interfere with your project—whatever that may be. I have heard of some cool things in the course of my life, but this is the coolest. You look sober, too.’

Stephen took up the packet and examined the writing on the back.

‘These are papers relating to my wife’s mother.’

‘Exactly so, and they are not of such a character as to make Mr. Dottridge desire that they should fall into the hands of a person who entertains such feelings for him as you evidently do.’

‘In that case I shall take care of them.’


And he put the papers in his pocket.

‘Come, come, this is carrying the joke a little too far. Hand over these papers, if you please. They relate to Dottridge’s private affairs.’

‘That is why I wish to retain them.’

‘What has come over you?’ exclaimed Rapier, affecting to treat the matter as a jest, but an unpleasant one. ‘Don’t you see what will happen if you do not instantly restore that property?’

‘I am not quite clear on that point. Perhaps you will enlighten me.’



It was amazing how cool this man had become—he who had been during the previous hours passing through the wildest storms of passion and emotion.

‘With pleasure. This is what will happen,’ said Rapier, with emphasis on every word. ‘I shall rouse the servants, call Dottridge, and charge you with attempted robbery and actual violence—I believe the marks of your fingers will be on my throat for a week.’

Stephen took a chair.

‘Thank you. I am most anxious to have a few words with Dottridge, although I would not have thought of disturbing him at this hour; but since you are so kind as to do it for me, I can only say that I shall be under an obligation to you.’

Rapier was on his way to the door when Stephen began to speak; he halted in the middle of the sentence, and he wheeled round at the end of it. He stood examining him

quietly—as if he had been a profound zoologist and the man an interesting specimen of a curious breed submitted for his inspection.

Stephen endured the inspection admirably, and that increased the interest of the observer.

This was what Rapier was saying to himself as he looked at the phenomenon :

‘I have never yet been outwitted by man or woman. Dottridge is keen, and yet he is under my thumb. Then here is this lout, who has always appeared to be as dull as country louts usually are—so dull that I did not think it necessary to give him particular attention—and can it be that at the moment when I have secured the means of making Dottridge do exactly what I please, I should be bowled out by this bumpkin? . . . No, sir, I am not to be beaten by you.’

He advanced to him, and clasping his hands behind his back, said with the air of one who

is good-naturedly trying to reason with a most unreasonable person :—

‘ This is confoundedly ridiculous, Meredith. Will you tell me frankly, at once—are you joking, or are you in earnest ? ’

Stephen gave a slight, disagreeable laugh.

‘ I am very much in earnest, as you will find.’

‘ Oh, . . . very well. In that case we understand each other, and we can discuss the matter in a business-like fashion.’

He drew a chair in front of the unwelcome visitor, and leaning forward, confidentially placed a hand on his knee.

‘ Explain—you have got some grudge against Dottridge. What is it ? You can trust me.’

Stephen was certainly thrown off his guard ; there was something so unspeakably sympathetic and good-natured in Rapier’s manner, combined with his consciousness of the awk-


ward position in which he was himself placed, that the spring of his hate for Dottridge being touched, it answered immediately.

‘Grudge against him! I hate him. Damn him.’

Rapier leaned back in his chair and drew a long breath. The Confidant within him exclaimed merrily, ‘Won, by Jove, by the first trump.’ Rapier himself had the expression of a friend who was surprised and puzzled by the sudden discovery of enmity between two people whom he had hitherto regarded as living on the most amicable terms.

‘Damn him by all means, my dear Meredith, but please let me understand something of your reason for it. He has been a good friend to you——’

That made Stephen jump. It made him forget the enquiry he had intended to make regarding Rapier’s possession of the master-key which he knew Dottridge guarded so carefully.



It made him forget the intention he had formed on finding that it was Rapier he was grasping by the throat to discover whether or not the man was honest or a rogue. All the degradation of his position was brought back by that single phrase, 'He has been a good friend to you.'

He was maddened.

'A friend!'

The word seemed to choke him. He rose and stretched out his arms as if he were clutching some unseen form, and again there was that horrible expression on his face which had stricken Dahlia down.

Rapier grasped his hands and pressed them tightly, with every evidence of great anxiety, but he did not speak.

Meredith, by some mighty effort, controlled, although he could not subdue, the passion which was in him. He flung Rapier's hands

from him, and seeing the carafe on the table, took a big drink of water.

‘Do you call that man a friend who has ruined your life?’ he said, in a low, quivering voice. ‘Do you call that man a friend who, under the pretence of blessings, has given you curses? . . . That is what Dottridge has done to me.’

‘He stood, unable to speak further, staring at Rapier. The latter remained still silent; he believed that he was victor; at any rate he saw his way now.

Meredith spoke impatiently.

‘You do not answer. You, of course, are his friend—I suppose because he has been such a good friend to you.’

Rapier did not heed the sneer, apparently, but he was saying within himself—‘He is still the lout I thought him.’

To Meredith he said:

‘If you will listen to me quietly for five

minutes, I will prove to you that I am more your friend than his. I will show you how to punish him.'

Meredith clutched his hand with wild joy, gasping :

'Show me that, and I will thank you with a life's gratitude.'

CHAPTER XLII.

MAD THOUGHTS.

WHEN Dahlia wakened in the morning she did not recollect what had occurred during the night. Her head was aching, and her eyes seemed to be on fire as if she had been crying for a long time.

Presently she vaguely comprehended that something strange had happened, and she strove desperately to put the events of the previous day together in her faltering memory in the hope that they would lead her up to the event which had caused the vague terror and oppression now upon her.

At length she recalled the jesting about Ruth at dinner, and Stephen's displeasure.

But that was not enough to account for his absence now. Evidently he had not been there all night.

She sat up and rang the bell for the servant who usually brought her a cup of tea in the morning, and as she was doing so there flashed upon her memory the reflection of that terrible face she had seen in the library. With a low moan of pain she buried her face in the pillow.

‘Here is the tea, ma’am,’ said the servant.

‘Thanks—put it on the table, please. Where is your master?’ said Dahlia, without looking up.

‘I’ll enquire, ma’am.’

During the girl’s absence Dahlia rose and put on her dressing gown. Her heart was beating wildly, and she made every movement with nervous haste.

‘Well?’ she queried impatiently, on the

return of the girl, whose absence had seemed long to her.

‘I can’t find him, ma’am ; but the door was open this morning before any of us got up, and we suppose it was the master went out. The lamp was burning in the library when Jane went in to do it up.’

‘Tell Mrs. Meredith I would like to speak to her.’

When she was again alone, Dahlia clasped her hands tightly on her head. It could not be that the foolish words she had spoken at dinner were so very wicked that he could not forgive them. No, it was not that. He had discovered the conditions on which she had obtained her fortune, and that she had been aware of them. Ruth must have told him.

At that thought she became cold, and her expression of fright gave place to one of rage. Well, so be it ; she had offered to explain everything to him more than once before the

marriage, and he had refused to hear it. He had himself told her that in order to win his confidence she must show him that she could respect that of others. Her conscience was clear on that score, and she did love him—he would never know how well. Ruth could not care for him as she did; if she had done so she would never have given him this cause for discontent.

Then there came upon her suddenly a new light. If Ruth had done this evil, Ruth should set it right. She would go to her; she would tell her the misery she was causing; and if she could not move her to pity—no, she would not ask for pity, she would ask for justice—if she could not move her then to help to make Stephen content, she would find some means of retaliation.

Then the mad thoughts came into her poor head again. She had no definite purpose, no sense of the dangers into which her excitement

might cast her before she was aware of what she was doing. There was only that wild, vague craving to keep her lover fast to herself—the same wild craving which in shipwreck makes a mother clasp her infant tightly to her breast with the vain sense that there is safety in the mere contact even whilst both are drowning. But failing, there was no deed too desperate for her to do. How it was to be done she did not know; but Rapier might. Ay, he was a cunning devil; he had said that she would need his help, and the time had come. The compact which she had entered into with him was of more consequence than she had at first imagined.

She was dressing with that nervous haste which characterised all her movements this morning, when Mrs. Meredith came to her.

‘My poor child, you look dreadfully ill,’ said the good-natured mother, as she kissed her. ‘What has happened?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Dahlia, brushing her hair viciously, ‘something bad has happened, although I don’t know what it is. Where is Stephen?—he has not been here all night.’

Mrs. Meredith took the commonplace view of the case; here were man and wife who had quarrelled, and thought that they would never speak to each other again, but she knew quite well that they would—as was usual—and that the person who interfered between them would be the one to suffer most. She had a very sensible notion, too, that if any friendly arbitration should be needed a mother-in-law was certainly not the person to be the arbitrator.

So she offered commonplace consolation, assuring the restless and irritable young wife that all would be right by-and-by, and giving her that most unendurable of all advice when one is in a temper—the advice to be patient.

‘Keep up your heart, dearie, you must

expect a little misunderstanding now and then. The wisest thing I can say to you is to settle it between yourselves, and don't speak a word about it to anybody. I don't think you should speak even to me. There now, I won't stay to talk about it, because talking will only make you worse, and when he comes in you should be ready to receive him quietly.'

Dahlia bit her lips to restrain an impatient retort which had been upon them.

With a hopeful smile Mrs. Meredith was going away when a servant entered with a letter.

'This is from Kemerton, ma'am, and the man is waiting to know if there is any answer.'

Dahlia snatched the letter from her. It was from Rapier, and, as she read, a curious expression of wonder and fear passed over her face.

'Is it from Stephen?' asked the mother.

She crumpled the letter in her hand.

‘No, it is not from him,’ she replied briskly to Mrs. Meredith ; and then turning to the servant :

‘Tell the man there is no answer.’

END OF THE SECOND VOLUME.





